

THRILLING Wonder STORIES

SCIENCE FICTION BY TOP WRITERS

FEATURING
**THE AMATEUR
ALCHEMIST**

A Novel
by Murray Leinster

FALL 25¢



A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

JACK COGGINS

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it fast or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count



above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

Came week-end liberty, I studied. Came a holiday, I studied. Came the end of the six weeks, I was top man in the class. Within six weeks I had mastered two years of high school math, thanks to the training I'd gotten.

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THRILLING

Wonder

STORIES

VOL. XLIV, NO. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION FALL ISSUE

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A DEPARTMENT FOR SCIENCE FICTION FANS

DOWN the hall from our editorial sanctum, there's another office containing a blonde and a hotplate. The blonde (named Helen) is slender and rather good looking, and she manages the hotplate whenever our crew gathers 'round for coffee. All the great decisions of the day are made at her desk.

For instance, it was agreed this morning that the last person to finish his coffee would have to put together the reader's column for this issue. I scalded my tongue with the coffee, but I still couldn't keep up with the 'old-timers. I think they inhale their morning coffee.

So I'm the one who sorts out your letters and makes comments. In case you're wondering who I am, let me set your mind at rest: I'm Anonymous.

Actually, the magazine is now under the guidance of a staff, all of whom take part in selecting the stories, lining up the issue, and so forth. It took several of us to replace Sam Mines, who was last seen speeding north to Great Barrington, Mass., for a happy and extended vacation. He dropped in on us the other day looking tanned and healthy after a couple of weeks of Massachusetts sunshine. He wanted to make sure that we put in a note about his spectacular departure.

As you probably realize, this editorial chair is well worn, in past years having borne the weight of men like Mort Weisinger and Sam Merwin. Consequently, Sam Mines had the problem of installing a new set of seat springs. He did so, but he also installed a special spring-release device which he could use when he finally decided to take leave of his duties.

Therefore, on a clear, sunny day several weeks ago he put on his hat, straightened his tie, pointed the chair toward an open window, and let the springs go boing. As he soared

through the stratosphere (holding his hat) he called back his farewell to one and all, as follows:

"There comes a time when change becomes necessary, no matter how comfortable the berth, how much a wrench the parting. There are other things to do, other work that has been put aside too long. I'll miss the friends I've made through our hectic letter columns—I hope they remember me kindly. My warmest memories remain with them."

And so he sped north to Great Barrington. Landed safely, I'm happy to say, and came back for a short visit the other day to see if we had caught his words correctly. We did, and there they are!

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

THE first thing I did, of course, was to pull those supersonic springs out of Sam's chair and sit down. And the first letter I came across dealt very appropriately with the problems of the s - f editor and the future development of the field. We couldn't print all of it, but you'll find it second in the letters that follow.

THE MAN WITH LONG EARS

by Tom Pace

Dear Editor: Quite a startling change in color values, from the usual TWS cover to the Summer cover. Sort of a pleasant change. I presume those are radioactives they are mining. And I hope those are robots, not men; if so, they aren't going to be in such good shape.

I won't try to discuss Sturgeon's "The Golden Helix." Sturgeon rides so close to the edge of be-

(Continued on page 8)

These great minds were Rosicrucians...

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Benjamin Franklin



Isaac Newton



Francis Bacon

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(Continued from page 6)

ing rococo sometimes, and yet the characterization is so good, the story line so clear! The ideas, too, go so far beyond the usual stf content.

Phillip K. Dick's "Time Pawn" has an underlying theme seldom recognized in time-travel stories; that a man of one time will be definitely out of place in another time. This is the most workable eugenic society I have ever seen described in stf, but it's not one I would care to live in.

Arentz's letter, pointing out that immoral Rome was dying Rome, is a not-quite-carried-through reflection on this business of "other times, other morals". For centuries, moralists have been confusing cause with effect in the case of Rome; for my money, Rome was decadent morally because Rome was dying; not vice versa. And the two are not the same. Rome was a military culture, an imperialistic, law-making, road-building culture of great military men and highly skilled slavers. Once they had reached the economic and geographic limits of their expansion, their history of dictatorial government kept them frozen into stagnation. It was this stagnation which produced decay; some of the effects of this decay were the excesses the later Romans went in for, to the exclusion of all else.

There is one form of successes which leaves no direction to go but down. Rome chose that form of success.

Victorianism is just as much an offense to nature as Pompeiism . . . if there is any such word! And it laid the foundation for nothing, Mr. Arentz, except the violent excesses of the twenties!

I disagree strongly with John Courtois that there is any such "conspiracy" between the leaders of all American religions. There doesn't have to be any such conspiracy. All religions are systems of thought which offer systems of ethical law and spiritual comfort to their adherents. My own objection to religions is their denial that Man can recognize, adopt, and observe ethical principles without dogmatic disciplines; and the fact that their greatest appeal, the comforting feeling of protection, has become an end in itself in all the religions, and an end, at that, which acts to prevent independent thought and nonconformism.

And dogmatic, rigid conformism is not a survival factor.

Wegars says sex is no longer clean and wholesome. What do we do now, Don, start manufacturing androids? Sex hasn't changed since prehistory. People change back and forth constantly. It isn't what you're looking at, you anthropocentric, it's where you're standing!

I wonder if most of the whooping over sex in TRS isn't an attempt at convincing oneself? Decisions on how to conduct one's sex life, like decisions on one's religion or lack of it, like decisions on the choice of an occupation, like, in fact, all decisions, are an individual matter. Our present tendency to make decisions as a group rather than as individuals means simply that a few leaders make the decisions for all. This leads to the rise of advertising as a profession, to cultism, to irresponsible politics, to fashions and fads, to nationally syndicated columnists, and to sundry other blights.

One last crack at the all-too-defenseless Rev. Moorehead; it isn't important, but he seems to

think that the Army will make a man out of me, thereby causing me to adopt his views, of course. Has the Reverend ever been in the Services? Or known anyone very well who has? If so, how can he believe that the Army changes anyone? All the services, or any other disciplined life, do is accentuate existing characteristics. If it is such a discipline that does not tolerate counter-opinions (much to my surprise, I discover that there is plenty of freedom of thought, action and expression in the Army; the old-timers assure me that that is what is wrong with the modern Army, and perhaps they're right!) it merely turns the convictions into neuroses or psychoses (?) of various sorts. Nothing really changes a man except the man himself, Reverend Moorhead.

Enough of this. If I ever get up to the Big Apple, I hope to drop by and let you inspect my ears. They aren't really like a jackass; just a little bit long.—4709A Gateway Terr. Arbutus, Md.

Say, how long are your ears? In meters, I mean. Editors don't have to worry about such things, because they can always tuck an extra inch of ear under a hat.

NO FORMULA FOR S-F

by Joe Gibson

Dear Editor: Today, there seems to be a widespread, general understanding that no editor could safely depend on merely what stories are submitted to him and still put out a magazine. He's got to have a complete layout of stories totalling just so many words for each and every issue—and he's got to have it complete before a specific deadline date when it has to go to the printers. Add to that that each issue needs a good lead story which will measure up with lead stories in previous issues and in the competitors' magazines. The editor's got to get this material somewhere, month after month. If he doesn't get it, he doesn't remain an editor for very long. He can't always sit around waiting for it to come to him.

And it's especially true in times when the market is flooded with magazines, all of 'em vying with each other for stories. Which beyond doubt explains how many of the readers know about it today. The beans are spilled. So we now know that quite a few s-f novels originated with an editor and an agent over a couple beers, that some big novels have been written as much by the editor as by the author; they'd get together and hash out the plot and characters and ideas, kicking it around until it shapes up as a good story—they hope.

A good writer is a craftsman with words, but with story-ideas he's a temperamental artist. He often needs help in jolting the shadow of an idea out of his sub-conscious catacombs and onto paper. Left to himself, he'd take a long time getting it out. An editor can't always wait that long. He's got a schedule to fill.

But under pressure, with a dozen editors demanding material, a writer's output can get ahead of his idea-hatching rate. He can run dry. Then you ask him for stories, try to get ideas out of

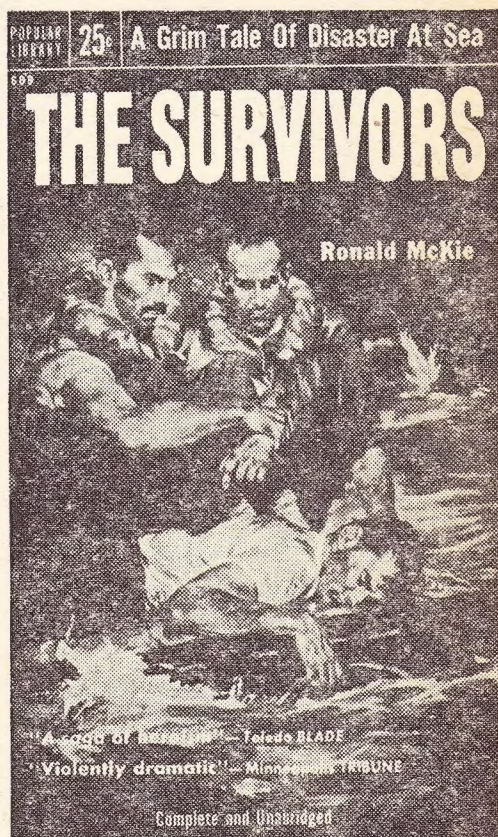
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THE AMATEUR



THE AMATEUR



ALCHEMIST

A Novel by **MURRAY LEINSTER**

*He stepped out of his own time into a medieval nightmare,
and discovered that the Sleeping Beauty was more than a legend. . . .*

I

HODGES cramped a beautifully tidy highway in the Hartz Mountain section of Germany, and thought bitter thoughts about the ordering of the cosmos. He had spent what he considered his youth, and all the life-insurance money set aside to see him educated, preparing to devote his life to scientific research. He yearned for it. He had believed that he would be happy.

Now he'd found out the going price of a newly-graduated Ph. D in physics. His guardian—preparing to wash his hands of Hodges once this last task was done—had found two possible jobs for him.

Pure science? Not a chance. Or research combined with

Illustrated by **VIRGIL FINLAY**



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Illustrated by **VIRGIL FINLAY**



teaching in a university laboratory? The thought had perished long since.

In two weeks Hodges would have just enough money left to get back to the United States. In fourteen days he would head back to tepid reality. He could choose between doing research on lubrication for an oil company, or a job as domesticated scientist for a tobacco manufacturer. In either case his function would be to devise some sort of evidence to back up the wild claims made by advertising departments. He had to choose one or the other. One of those jobs was his future.

"I'll go back and learn how to punch a time-clock," muttered Hodges bitterly, "and learn to gloat if ever a vice president speaks to me. And probably develop company loyalty and marry somebody's secretary. In time I'll smile tolerantly at the idea that anybody could ever want anything but a raise in pay. I'd be better off dead!"

The last statement was more emotional than rational, but Hodges did feel low. He'd had some ideas about the interatomic and intermolecular bonds which make solid objects solid. He'd written his thesis on it. He had hoped to work in some field in which those ideas could either be disproved or developed. But instead he would spend his life finding out things for television announcers to say in their commercials.

"To hell with it," said Hodges gloomily. "People do that sort of thing and survive. And I've got to eat, I suppose."

At this moment it was half-past eleven, a. m., Berlin time, of a mildly cloudy day. He was about three miles out of the ancient and practically forgotten town of Goslar when somebody in the forest beside the road began to swear furiously in German. It was a man's voice—and then he heard a woman scream.

Hodges didn't think at all. He acted exactly as he would have acted at home. He plunged off the road, racing through the underbrush to help the woman. It sounded like some sort of crime—

He heard the man shouting again, just as he tripped and fell. He got up again and attacked a steep hillside on which assorted trees grew at improbable angles. He felt dizzy, but he climbed doggedly at the best speed he could maintain.

He reached the top and his dizziness left him. He heard an indescribable small sound and thrust toward it through extremely thick brushwood, and suddenly he came out into a small leafy glade.

Here he came upon a sort of tableau containing three figures. One was a young German whom Hodges later came to know as Fritz. He wore the shapeless work-clothes of a mechanic, or a black-marketeer, or something else illegal and customary. Fritz stood in despairing defiance in the middle of the glade, staring bitterly up into the muzzle of a wicked-looking Mauser pistol.

THE PISTOL was in the hand of the most dazzling buxom blonde Hodges had ever seen. She held Fritz covered from the saddle of a huge gray animal, and her cold blue eyes were more daunting than the weapon itself. She had on a flame-colored gown. A golden—or at least gilt—coronet sat upon her mass of yellow hair that flowed lavishly down to her waist and beyond. She was startlingly good to look at, to anybody who liked them plump.

But she hardly registered on Hodges' consciousness after her first movement of reaction to his coming. It was the beast she was riding that made Hodges' eyes practically pop out of his head.

It was a portly and not especially well-proportioned animal. It was broad-beamed, and at first its tail was toward Hodges. But his intrusion caused the blonde female—he later came to know her as Katrina—to swing menacingly around to cover him with the pistol. To turn, she reined her mount about. Hodges saw the animal clearly.

It was a unicorn.

It should be made clear that this was present-day Germany; Germany divid-

ed into Eastern and Western Zones. In one, people knew that if they so much as hinted that they did not live in the best of all possible worlds, they would be sent to mine uranium and learn better. In the other, Germans knew that the only thing wrong with this world was that they didn't win the last war. But in neither Eastern nor Western Germany are there unicorns.

But this was a unicorn.

Its body was that of a horse, heavy-

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The Editor

set and with the solidity of a farm-animal, and colored a dappled gray. The mane and tail, absolutely everything about it was horse, except that there was a long white horn growing out of its forehead. This horn was perfectly straight, with a spiral groove going out to its needle-sharp tip. It was about four feet long, and it was definitely a part of the animal's head.

The slightly over-voluptuous blonde snapped ferociously at Hodges:

"Who are you and what do you want?"

She spoke in German. Hodges' German was usually workmanlike, but it didn't work very well as he stared at the preposterous creature she rode. He blinked. Screams and swearings and even Mauser pistols could not take his attention from this!

"Who are you?" repeated the blonde angrily. Her voice rose. It was not a soft voice; German voices rarely are. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I—well—I'm an American," said Hodges, still staring at the unicorn. "I heard you scream and thought you needed help. So I came to offer it. What I want most of all right now," he added, gazing at the unicorn's horn, "is to touch that horn. May I?"

She glared at him scornfully. "What is an American?" she demanded.

The oddity of the question did not register for an instant. Hodges reached out to touch the horn. He did touch it. It was solid. There was no give to it. It was unquestionably a part of the creature's head. But it had a peculiar feel to it, being neither warm nor cool. It should have been, because everything we touch is either a little warmer or a little colder than the skin of our hands. But the horn had absolutely no temperature.

The unicorn tossed its head impatiently. It did not like to be touched on its needle-sharp spear. Then it began to crop at the grass underfoot.

Hodges blinked at it again. His scientific training made him a realist, at least so far as facing facts were concerned. But it also made him a skeptic, in that he refused to accept impossible conclusions. A combination of the two attitudes assured him that he had gone out of his head.

As a sane man and a realist, he knew what he saw. As a physicist and a skeptic he knew that it was not possible for a horn to be neither hot nor cold. It had to be one or the other. Hodges' knew something about the structure of matter. Temperature is a normal property of substance. Any solid object that

has no temperature has no molecules in it in random motion. It has no atoms or free electrons. It cannot exist!

The unicorn's horn had no temperature.

Hodges heard Fritz begin babbling, his defiance suddenly disappearing for no reason that Hodges could make out. He noted abstractedly that the blonde sat in a side-saddle, hardly modern. It was upholstered in pink satin. Fritz babbled that an American was a member of a nation of fabulously rich men, all of them unmarried, and that Hodges was among the richest of them and would make a truly wonderful husband.

The statement was hardly based on fact, so Hodges ignored it and bent down to look closely at the unicorn's horn while the animal grazed. He moved back quickly when the creature raised its head again.

"I'd like—" said Hodges to the blonde, "I'd like very much to examine this creature thoroughly. Its horn hasn't any temperature."

The blue eyes fell upon him. There was something odd about them—they were much colder than ice.

"What you would like," she told him, "does not matter. You will come with me!"

To Fritz she said venomously, "Go before me!"

She waved the Mauser, by no means negligently. The young German was instantly struck dumb. He wrung his hands. The pistol lifted and the golden-haired vision sighted along its barrel. Fritz, his feet dragging, moved toward the upper end of the glade.

"Now you!" said the cold-eyed blonde to Hodges.

"May I really come?" he asked hopefully.

"I'll kill you if you do not!" she snapped.

Hodges elatedly started to move after the slowly trudging Fritz, and then realized what she had said.

"What the devil?" he demanded, stopping short.

THE BLONDE'S finger tightened perceptibly upon the trigger of the pistol. Hodges sputtered. Then he shrugged his shoulders. Nothing could have kept him from trying to find out more about this unicorn and its horn, anyway. Its completely impossible lack of any property of heat or cold was something that he could not leave uninvestigated.

Almost without being aware of it, he had already discarded a number of explanations of the scene he'd interrupted. A motion picture company could be making a picture somewhere nearby. This dazzling blonde was the Teutonic ideal of beauty. She could be an artistic job of makeup. The situation of the young man and the female could have been a lover's quarrel, and the blonde might be only tempestuous.

But no lovesick damsel, chasing and overtaking an errant swain, would want to carry off an extra captive. No movie actress would ask, "What is an American?" And no studio makeup department could get a horn fixed on a horse's head so solidly and so perfectly that the faking could not be detected at close range.

Hodges shook his head to clear his brain. He found himself trudging alongside Fritz, who wore the anguished expression of a man walking to his own execution. They came to the end of the glade, and Fritz despairingly turned toward the right. A narrow horse-trail led downhill and back in the direction from which Hodges had originally come.

The underbrush on either side was thick, the trees were huge, fallen trunks were rotting away. That was not natural. The state forests of Germany were not as neat as they used to be, but in all of Germany wood is valuable. If a storm blows down a tree, somebody cuts it up. If not into lumber, then at least into firewood. Trees are not allowed to rot. These were rotting. It was not natural.

"Look," said Hodges to the man beside him, "what's all this? Who's the lady? How'd she get that—animal?"

Fritz answered out of the side of his mouth, bitterly.

"Her name is Katrina. She says she's going to marry me."

"Is she—" Hodges knew she wasn't, but he asked anyway. "Is she a movie actress?"

Fritz made an embittered and utterly hopeless sound.

"*Nein!* If I tell you what she is, you won't believe me!"

The trail went circuitously around the steep bank Hodges had climbed perhaps a quarter-hour ago. They should have come to the highway along which he had tramped. They did not. Instead, they arrived at a dusty dirt road, wider than the horsetrack which led to it, and with many hoofprints in the earth. There were no wheel-tracks at all.

"Odd," said Hodges, looking up and down the valley into which the highway had run. "I thought there was a road here. It must have branched off."

"*Nein,*" said Fritz with vast bitterness. "This is it."

"I mean the road from Goslar," explained Hodges. "I came out from Goslar on it."

"This," repeated Fritz despairingly, "is it. I don't understand, *Meinherr*. But this is the road from Goslar, and it goes all the way into Goslar like this, and Goslar is not Goslar when you get to it, though yet it is."

Hodges regarded him sharply. His mind wanted to work on the problem of the unicorn's horn. But this Fritz—

"What's this trouble you're in?" he asked. "Were you—ah—locked up somewhere?"

II

H E THOUGHT that Fritz might be a mental patient, but Fritz laughed scornfully, without the least trace of mirth.

"I was smuggling," he said savagely. "A friend said he had found a route to East Germany that was not guarded. It had to be traveled on foot, and one

had to use packhorses, but one made much money. I went with him. We went into East Germany without a single Russian spotting us. But the country we went through!"

Fritz spat.

"Even the Nazis never bothered these people! They are poverty-stricken. They are mad! They use candles for light and there is no road a truck can use, and they dress—" Fritz used a gesture to indicate the utter scorn of a young German for costumes differing from those of black-marketeers.

"We started back from the East Zone on that crazy route. We stopped in a village. This Katrina came into the village on a mule. Not on this beast, on a mule! She told me she was single. She told me she loved me. She told me she was rich. She showed me that she was rich! And I was a fool! I stayed behind to marry her! She liked a Mauser I had, and I showed her how to use it. Then, when I understood, I tried to run away. You just saw how she caught me! And she will take me back and—"

Fritz broke into incoherent profanity, but it was not all rage. He was frenziedly angry, but he was also scared to death. And at least half of what he swore at he did not understand, and was the more frightened because of it. He trudged down the dusty road and his mouth uttered horrible things and his eyes stared, and he became oblivious of Hodges.

Hodges turned and looked very carefully at the animal behind him. Indubitably it was a unicorn, by the definition that a unicorn is a horse with a single, straight, spirally-grooved horn sticking out of its forehead. The girl mounted on it was as unquestionably a beauty, if regularity of feature and pink-and-white skin and an unlimited amount of golden hair is beauty.

"*Wass ist?*" she demanded coldly.

He resumed his march, racking his brain. A state of things like this was not reasonable. It did not make sense, and therefore was not real.

But in dreams or delusions one does not doubt the phantoms of one's imagination. Hodges did. Profoundly. Therefore, this was neither dream nor delirium.

There was a sound of hoofs ahead—a considerable body of horsemen moving at a brisk trot. Normal travelers do not travel at a brisk trot. Normally, indeed, one does not find bodies of horsemen in Germany. Certainly not in the Western Zone. Hodges was aware of the implausibility of the sound. Still, with a unicorn plodding along behind him, he could hardly cavil at minor implausibilities.

The vision on the dappled animal, however, let out a sudden screech. It was a frantic command to dive into the woods. Hodges swung around to stare at her, and she waved furiously, commanding her two prisoners to hide.

The trotting hoofbeats came nearer and nearer. Fritz broke into a dead run toward the unseen body of horsemen and away from the blonde, zig-zagging desperately from one side of the trail to the other.

The lovely figure on the unicorn screeched at him. Hodges recognized the timbre of her voice. It was a scream of fury, not of fear. Then there was the blasting, savage report of the Mauser. The beautiful if buxom figure in the satin-upholstered saddle blazed away at Fritz's darting, dodging shape. Hodges saw dust spurt up beside him.

There came a yelling above the sound of hoofbeats. The cadence of many horses trotting together rose to the thunder of many horses in a headlong run. Then—as Katrina fired, and fired again, screeching all the while—a plunging mass of animals came pouring around the next curve.

Their appearance was of a piece with unicorns and golden-haired damsels who kidnapped people to marry them, and dirt roads where macadamized highways ought to be. Twenty or thirty ruffianly, whiskered horsemen, wearing steel cuirasses and carrying lances,

came pouring around the end of the road. At sight of the golden-haired figure on the unicorn, they yelled more violently and spurred for her. Lances came down for attack. There were bellying explosions, and huge puffs of white smoke appeared. They were shooting ancient, black-powder weapons.

The buxom vision screeched yet again and emptied the Mauser at them. A horse plunged and went down. Hodges had an instant of nauseated horror, but the rearmost horses leaped over their fallen companion. They didn't pile up in a mass of tumbled horseflesh. There was a continuous rippling motion as the rear ranks leaped the toppled mount and rider.

Fritz plunged off the roadway, but stayed in plain view, his hands held high, shouting desperately to the horsemen. They passed him by. They were heading for the blonde on the unicorn. Hodges swallowed, and moved aside in time to avoid being ridden down. He had a moment's kaleidoscopic vision of racing, sweaty animals rushing past him in a swiftly-risen cloud of dust. The dense and choking stuff about him swirled away, and he heard the yelling of the men change in quality.

The sound of hoofs changed, too. The riders were reining in sharply, and their shouts were furious and baffled. They, of course, were still hidden by the dust they had raised. But Hodges could see Fritz again, and he could see the convulsively kicking horse that had been wounded, and also its rider limping out of reach of its hoofs. The dismounted man wore long red whiskers, and he was swearing with a depth and complexity of expression that Hodges' sketchy German did not let him appreciate.

Fritz approached that man. Pleadingly. Joyfully. He began to explain something at impassioned length. The dismounted, whiskered man paid no attention.

The voices diminished behind Hodges. He turned. The dust was either settling

or rolling slowly off into the forest on either side. He saw the mounted men at a halt in the dirt road. Their horses moved restlessly, as horses do. The troop—troopers—seemed to be utterly disgusted but not at all surprised.

The road along which Hodges and Fritz had trudged for at least half a mile, now ended abruptly less than a hundred yards back. Where Fritz and Hodges had marched, and where Fritz had worked himself up into an hysterical state of funk and frenzy, there was now forest. Trees grew out of the dusty road-surface. Brushwood blanked out the spaces between the trees. The highway was obliterated by woodland which looked as if it had been growing there for a hundred years.

Hodges saw one of the troopers poke his spear at a tree. The spear went through without encountering any resistance at all. One of the troopers forced his horse into the brush. The brush was not disturbed by his passage. But the horse was highly reluctant. There was an unintelligible chorus of warnings from the mounted men remaining outside.

The rider in the newly-appeared forest came out again. His horse was agitated and prancing sidewise. Hodges saw its body interpenetrate an obviously unsubstantial tree. It came out into the open, trembling. The troopers swung about and came back to where Hodges stood. A swaggering giant reined in and scowled down at him. He was plainly the leader of this troop.

"How the devil," demanded Hodges, "was that done? The forest, I mean?"

The whiskery man regarded Hodges in each detail of his costume and accessories, from the raincoat rolled up as a knapsack to the portable radio slung over his shoulder. He snorted.

"*Ein Auslander, eh?*" he observed with relish. It was clear that Hodges' painstaking German had an English accent. "And going about with old Katrina! We'll have a fine hanging!"

He barked an order. Men leaped from

their horses upon Hodges. It was utterly unexpected, but Hodges reacted by instinct, as promptly as he had reacted to a woman's scream some twenty minutes before. He exploded into violent resistance. His right fist crashed into a bulbous nose. He felt his left sink deep into a belly unprotected by a cuirass. He swung furiously into counter-attack, and somebody hit his knees from behind in a crude but effective tackle.

He managed to keep them busy for nearly five minutes after that, though. After his first fall, he managed to get to his feet no less than three times. Each time he was smothered under successive avalanches of unwashed and burly antagonists. When at last a man sat on his chest and others held each arm and leg and two others were busy wrapping ropes around him, he relaxed.

The whiskery giant looked down approvingly.

"*Gross Gott!*" he boomed warmly. "You I would like to have in my troop! Why are you such a fool as to go around with old Katrina?"

Hodges tongued an uncomfortable amount of road-dust out of this mouth and grunted:

"I was with her because she had a pistol pointed at me!" He squinted up at the chief of his captors. "If you are looking for recruits for your troop, we might make a deal. I could do with a chance for field-research on non-temperature materials!"

The whiskered man grunted regretfully:

"It cannot be. You have to be hanged. But it is a pity! I watched with much admiration."

Hodges' binding was completed. Men got off of him. Somebody heaved him upright. Hodges swore a little.

"I'll be obliged," he said irritably, "if you will have somebody shift this infernal radio! Its digging into my ribs."

The blond giant inspected it, muttering, "Radio?" He shifted a line of rope and relieved Hodges of the portable

radio's corner digging into him. Hodges ached in a remarkably large number of places, and his clothes were torn and one eye was blacked and his lip was swelling. He nodded at the ground.

"My hat."

SOMEBODY picked it up, cheerfully slapped the dust off it, and put it on his head. He craned his neck around to look up the road in the direction from which he had come so recently. The highway was clear again. It was no longer blocked by a forest sprung from nothingness, into which a horseman had been able to ride without stirring a leaf, and whose treetrunks offered no resistance. He stared incredulously.

"I will be glad," said Hodges complainingly, "if somebody will tell me how the hell people make forests appear and disappear, and how unicorns have horns without temperature, and a few other little things like that!"

Riders came back to the group around Hodges. Fritz was with them. Fritz had not resisted as Hodges had. Fritz's hands were tied behind his back and there was a rope around his neck. He had to run to keep pace with the horsemen. His face was now a sickly gray color.

"*Meinherr!*" he cried shrilly, to Hodges. "Tell them I was not a friend of Katrina's! Tell them she tried to kill me with my own Mauser!"

"That's right," Hodges told the huge leader of the troop. "You heard the shooting before you sighted her. Katrina was trying to kill him because he was trying to run away."

The giant said skeptically:

"Why kill him for running away?"

"She meant to marry me!" panted Fritz.

The expressions on the troopers' faces changed. It appeared that they believed that a blonde lovely like Katrina would track down somebody like Fritz with an automatic pistol to persuade him into holy matrimony.

"You," said a trooper interestedly,

"would have been—is it her fifteenth husband?"

"Eighteenth," said another authoritatively. "You are sure—" this was to Fritz—"that you did not marry her?"

Fritz was shivering, but he read encouragement in the faces of his captors. Some trace of color began to come back into his cheeks. He began to explain with vehemence and detail just how he had been traveling from the Eastern Zone back into the Western, and how Katrina saw him. She had proved to him that she was rich. She showed him kegs of gold coins. So he agreed to marry her.

The troopers were amused. They marveled that anybody could be so innocent as to believe in kegs of gold-pieces Katrina might display. They tended to laugh at Fritz.

"But I saw them!" he protested miserably. "I felt them! I handled them!"

The whiskery leader of the troop came to a decision. He was even generously pleased about it.

"Maybe," he said cordially to Hodges, "I should take you to the Graf. You can tell him your story, and if he believes it he may set you free. Of course, if he does not believe it, you will be much worse off than if we hang you now. He truly hates witches and wizards! But I will let you decide. Do we take you to the Graf, or do we hang you now?" He added, "I like the way you fight, so I give you your choice."

"I think," Hodges said conservatively, "I'll postpone the hanging. I couldn't really die happy without knowing a few things first. Fritz just said something about seeing and handling kegs of gold-pieces and you laughed. Why laugh?"

"Katrina would have only hermetic gold-pieces, made by witchcraft," said the blond giant amiably. "As Katrina's appearance is a hermetic appearance. Like the forest that stopped us from catching her. It was a hermetic forest. It is wizardry, witchcraft. It is against the law for such things to be made ex-



Hodges wondered if
she'd changed to beauty—or beast!

cept by the Graf's alchemist, at the command of the Graf, in the public interest."

The last phrase was said flatly, as one says something it is better not to disbelieve. It was like the *heils* to the Kremlin heard in the Eastern Zone. Like the way some people in the Western zone speak of democracy. Then the troop-captain barked an order, and his followers formed up casually, facing back in the direction from which they had come. Somebody heaved Hodges up on a horse before him. It was not comfortable, and the trooper had not bathed recently, but the troop started off. Hodges observed that Fritz was still on foot, walking fast with the rope around his neck. He would be very weary by the time the troop had gone a mile or two.

III

THE commander of the horsemen rode companionably beside Hodges.

"It is against the law everywhere," he observed, "for anybody but the graf or the duke or the king to have hermetic things made by witchcraft or alchemy. But you are an *Auslander*. Your speech is strange, and you seem not to know many common things. Is it not the law in your country that only the ruler can use things made by witchcraft? What is your country?"

Hodges found himself jolted unmercifully as the horse on which he was carried moved along the highway. The official rider of the animal had the comfortable part of the saddle. Hodges rode more or less on its peak. It might be preferable to walk, but not with a noose around one's neck.

"My country is America," said Hodges, groping among some very new ideas for a few that could be put together and become intelligible.

The captain of the troop shook his head.

"I have never heard of such a land," he said placidly. "It must be very small

and far away."

Hodges opened his mouth and then closed it. The word "hermetic" was supposed to explain kegs of gold, and suddenly appearing and disappearing forests, and Katrina's blonde good looks. It did not happen to mean anything to Hodges in those contexts. In elementary physics, "hermetic" was an antique term for an airtight seal.

Hodges started in his uncomfortable seat as he realized from where the word derived. Hermes Trismigestus was an ancient alchemist. He was the first man known to seal anything up airtight—hermetically. He had spent his life in passionate search for the philosopher's stone. It was said that he had achieved it, which was impossible. But—

Hodges worked more wetted dust out of his mouth.

"You use a word not known in my country," he said slowly. "The word 'hermetic.' Would it refer to Hermes Trismigestus, by any chance?"

The guard-captain shrugged.

"Perhaps. I listened once as the Graf swore at his alchemist. The Graf was angry. He told his alchemist that Hermes Trismigestus had made true gold, while the castle alchemist could make only hermetic metal. He threatened to hang him if he did not do better. But," added the guard-captain, "he did not." Then he said in some curiosity, "Do you *Auslanders* know of novelties in alchemy? If you can do things better than the Graf's alchemist, he will hang him and put you in his place."

Hodges blinked very slowly as the horse carried him uncomfortably down the dusty road. Hermetic metal. Hermetic forest. Hermetic *horn*? The Graf—that meant a count—had an alchemist—

Hodges swallowed hard. Some dust went down his throat.

"It might be well," said the guard-captain amiably, "that I did not hang you. *Hein*?"

Hodges nodded in a sort of dazed meditation. He began to see a dazzling

possibility in physics. His notions about intermolecular bonds might have to be revised.

But he could just barely begin to see a faint, remote possibility—

"Yes," he said after a moment. "It is quite likely that it is fortunate you did not hang me. I may be able to do some rather impressive things in a hermetic way, after I've talked to the Graf's alchemist."

"But of course," warned the captain, "if the Graf is in a bad mood, you will wish you had been hanged! He has special reason to hate all witches and their friends!"

They rounded a curve in the road, and there was the edge of the forest. Open fields lay before them, and the town of Goslar could be seen about two miles away.

Or was it Goslar? It stood where Goslar had stood. It lay at the foot of the Rammelsberg, and there were the towers of the Kaiserhof and the Baker's Hall and the Jacobikirche. But it was not the Goslar that Hodges had slept in the previous night. That had been half modern and half decayed. This was ancient, but not decayed at all. Banners waved in bright sunshine atop the castle walls.

Figures moved in and out of the gates—medieval figures!

The troopers rode leisurely toward it. Hodges should have been dazed afresh, but he almost ignored this latest oddity. He was absorbed in trying to integrate the idea of the philosopher's stone with unicorns and modern physics and intermolecular bonds. He reflected that before this was over he was going to need a cyclotron to use on a unicorn's horn.

He could almost bet on the results he'd get.

They were carried through the streets of a town which simply could not exist as they saw it, or be peopled by inhabitants wearing the costumes and practising the way of life they did. It was almost a relief to be locked up—as they were.

THE GIRL with the corroty hair turned up a couple of hours later, when the relief had worn off. They were lodged in one of the deeper dungeons of the castle of Goslar. It was a perfectly normal dungeon, in a way. On his walking tour of Germany, Hodges had seen others. But the others were merely relics; cleaned-out, deodorized, and made fit for the production of pleasurable shudders in tourists. This dungeon was in working order. It had mouldy, blackened straw on its floor. It had a distressingly solid and unrusty iron grille closing its opening. And it smelled. It smelled luridly!

There were noises around. Hodges paced squeamishly back and forth. Fritz had sagged into a discouraged heap in one corner.

"Dammit!" said Hodges. "There's bound to be some sense in this somewhere! It's real, and reality always makes sense! What year is it here?"

"They know the year," said Fritz mournfully, "and the day of the month. They are not that crazy."

"And this is Goslar, but not the Goslar I slept in last night. That castle was practically falling down! This one is in repair!"

"I know," moaned Fritz. "But I don't understand! I don't see why you bother. We are going to be hanged!"

"Nonsense," snapped Hodges. "The Graf was asleep, so we were flung in here until he woke up. But the guard-captain said he wouldn't mention us until the Graf was in a good humor. He wants me in his troop of *lanzknechts*!"

It was at this moment that the snub-nosed red-headed girl put her face to the grille which closed the end of the dungeon. She regarded them with calm curiosity. Hodges stared at her. She didn't belong here, down in the lower levels of the castle, with rats and prisoners and other vermin.

"Du Fritz," said the snub-nosed girl calmly.

Fritz looked up and moaned, "Anna!" Hodges had noticed that Fritz seemed

to feel pure horror at the idea of contact with beautiful damsels riding on unicorns. But this girl was certainly not in the same category. She had nice blue eyes. Her nose was snub, and her face was freckled, and her hair was carrotty in color, and her mouth was a bit too big. She wore a long, draggled, essentially shapeless smock that ended about four inches above her bare feet.

"Katrina still loves you," said the girl in a detached fashion. "She still wants to marry you."

Fritz uttered words. Hodges' German was sound enough, but there were a lot of these words that he'd never heard before. The air seemed to turn slightly blue. From Fritz's expression and panicky manner, Hodges judged that it would be appropriate to smell sulfur. The girl put her hands to her ears and waited patiently until Fritz should have ended his swearing.

"Hold it!" said Hodges.

He put his hand on Fritz. Fritz ceased to speak and sat down in the corner of the dungeon again with his head in his hands. He looked the picture of ultimate despair.

"What's all this?" Hodges asked the girl.

She looked at him with a sort of regretful remoteness. But she said precisely:

"Katrina still loves him." She jerked a thumb at Fritz. "I'm sent to get him out of here if he will come and marry her."

Hodges looked very intently at the girl. He noticed something very peculiar about her face. It was the freckles. They were arranged—

"Anna," cried Fritz hoarsely, "I want to hang quietly. Go away!"

The girl looked concerned.

"But the Graf doesn't hang everybody!" she objected. "You were with Katrina! You know what he has done to people like that!"

Hodges shuddered. One does not visit more than a few medieval castles, complete with torture chambers, with-

out losing most of one's curiosity about what can be done to a human being before he dies of it. It takes only a little knowledge to satisfy that sort of curiosity.

"I don't know what's so dreadful about marrying a blonde," Hodges said encouragingly to Fritz.

The girl, Anna, said with disarming candor:

"He's thinking about her first seventeen husbands. But he might be able to run away again." Then she looked over her shoulder and darted away abruptly, running along the hallway between the dungeons. She evidently turned a corner and became invisible, because the blond giant of a guard-captain gave no sign of having seen her.

He stopped before the dungeon door and said depressedly:

"Too bad! The Graf woke up in a bad mood. He had a dream about his daughter. So when he heard two men had been captured who had been friendly with Katrina, he said to begin their execution as soon as the wheel could be set up."

"The wheel?" asked Hodges politely.

"You're to be broken on the wheel," the guard-captain said irritably. "The Graf is firm that people mustn't deal with Katrina. He hates all witches and wizards. I'm lucky he didn't punish me for not catching her!"

HODGES felt the despairing calm which is suitable for a man who suddenly finds himself surrounded by lunatics who act sadly patient with him for being sane.

"So," said the guard-captain gloomily, "with you being executed, I can't get you to teach my men some of those tricks you used when you were fighting them. There was one particular trick—Would you explain it if I can show you what I mean?"

"I'm afraid not," said Hodges, with a sort of desperate courtesy. "Of course, with time I could teach your men excellent combat techniques. I was rather

specially trained in such things in the American army."

The guard-captain shook his head.

"No time," he said regretfully. "They're setting up the wheel now. They'll start the executions in half an hour."

Hodges abruptly found his throat dry.

"How long do such things last?" he asked.

"You look healthy," said the captain professionally. "You might last six or seven hours. Why?"

"I was—interested," said Hodges.

The guard-captain sighed and moved away. Hodges licked his lips and turned to Fritz.

"This," he said firmly, "is no time to be fanatical! Maybe you think you'd prefer to be broken on the wheel for marrying a lush blonde like Katrina, but dammit—"

Fritz was ashen-gray. His eyes were wide with horror. He could not speak at all.

The girl with carroty hair appeared calmly before the dungeon door again. She opened her mouth to speak.

"He accepts," said Hodges instantly. "He will be delighted to become Katrina's husband. He doesn't look it, but he's overcome with rapture. He acts like this because he's bashful. How are you going to get us out of here?"

The girl said, "I'll get the turnkey. He is bribed. I think we had better hurry."

She moved out of view, this time to the right.

"Get up!" said Hodges fiercely. "Pull yourself together! Don't fall apart at the seams now! If we're getting out of here, get up and get set to walk, run, crawl or climb to the nearest exit! Dammit, this is a serious matter even if I'm crazy to believe it!"

He heard the clanking of keys. There were footsteps. Fritz moaned. Simultaneously, the snub-nosed girl reappeared, and after her came an ancient, skinny, wrinkled man. He beamed through rheumy eyes. His jaws were

shrunk. His hair was sparse and dirty-gray. He wore the long hose and doublet which seemed to be the standard costume of Goslar. But he grinned toothlessly and seemed to try to skip as he approached the dungeon door. With clankings, he produced a monstrous iron key.

He unlocked the door.

"Maybe," said the girl compassionately, "you'd better carry Fritz. He doesn't look like he can walk."

Hodges heaved the nerveless Fritz over his shoulder. He got through the door as it opened. His portable radio, still slung about him, stalled him in the opening for a second, but he could not spare time to throw it away. He almost stepped on the girl's bare heels as she led the way down the corridor. He heard the door clank shut behind him. Thirty feet, and the skipping, exultant, decrepit turnkey came hopping after them.

He cackled gleefully and scuttled ahead with speed.

There was little light here. There were merely murky air-holes to some courtyard overhead, and they were infrequent and remote. One could see only dimly in the corridor and not at all into the cells, which was quite fortunate.

From one fetid opening, as they passed, there came the sound of giggling. It was quite mad, and it was the most blood-curdling sound that Hodges had ever heard. But only a little farther, he heard worse. Out of a black cell-door came inarticulate, babbling, contented sounds which were exactly like the noises made by a baby too young to talk. Only these sounds were in a man's deep bass voice. From yet another dungeon came a stench so monstrous that Hodges gagged.

But then came a flight of narrow stone steps which seemed to climb indefinitely. The capering, prancing ancient climbed gleefully before them. Hodges, carrying Fritz, panted desperately after the girl in the shapeless smock.

IV

THE STAIRS seemed to have no end at all. But, quite suddenly, the turnkey cackled again, a lock screeched, and a hinge made a noise which was practically a sustained howling. The turnkey hopped out of the opened door, the girl with carrotty hair went second, and Hodges followed after.

Then he was appalled. They were presumably in the act of escaping from prison. But they were in a courtyard in which other persons moved about, none of whom displayed any curiosity. There was a cart with a pile of brushwood and an incredibly ancient horse was hitched to its shafts.

Here, in the brighter light, Hodges saw with incredulity that the turnkey had adorned his doddering frame with the brightest colors and most fascinating ribbons a medieval costume would permit. He beamed and simpered to himself. With a surprising agility he climbed to the seat of the cart. Hodges looked helplessly at the girl.

"You will hide under the faggots," she said tranquilly. "Both of you. Then I will drive you to my mistress' house."

Hodges dumped Fritz into the cart. He climbed in after him. The girl matter-of-factly piled brushwood over them with no noticeable furtiveness. If anybody saw her, they did not raise an alarm. It was even Hodges' impression that people who happened to look that way hastily turned their heads in another direction. It did not seem normal, until he reflected that he and Fritz had been condemned to be broken on the wheel merely because they had been seen in company with Katrina. Anybody associated with an escape from prison, even as a witness, might be in an equally bad situation. The great public would passionately disassociate itself from all acts of rebellion against authority, to the extent of ignoring them whenever possible.

The girl climbed to the cart's seat. She whacked the horse and it started

off reluctantly.

Escaping from prison seemed as remote from the expectable as other matters in this peculiar area. It appeared to be done placidly, with no particular attempt at concealment. But, nobody wanted to get mixed up in it! It also seemed to involve as much discomfort as everything else that had happened.

The courtyard was floored with very large and uneven stones, and the cart bumped and banged upon them. It had no springs. There was no possible way to escape a blow of one's whole body against the floor-boards with every bump.

But Hodges lay still. From time to time, Fritz moaned a little. Absolutely all life and all hope seemed to have departed from him. He suffered from that peculiar result of Germanic culture which makes some people raised in it absolutely unable to defy authority in any matter. Fritz had made one attempt to run away from a gorgeous blonde, whom he feared more than hanging. But when he was given a choice between her and being authoritatively broken on the wheel, he could not choose. He waited for somebody else to decide his fate.

The cart moved across the castle courtyard. A certain amount of light penetrated the brushwood. Hodges was aware of a period of darkness, which he guessed was when they passed through the castle wall, under the archway. Then for an interminable period the creaking cart bounced and bumped and whacked and thumped upon the cobbles of what must have been a street.

During this ordeal the cart changed direction several times. Hodges heard the racket of other carts. He heard a shrill quarrel, in women's voices, which was soon left behind. Then there was another, briefer darkness, and the pounding of the wheels on cobblestones ceased. Thereafter the cart merely creaked and swayed on a softer surface, which Hodges guessed to be a dirt highway. There were no more voices about.

There were no more echoes.

Presently Hodges heard a bird singing.

"Can I sit up now?" he called softly.

The girl said. "*Natürlich*. We are well away from the town."

Hodges poked his head out of the brush that covered him. The cart lurched and swayed onward. The walls of Goslar were a good mile behind, there was blue sky overhead, there were some crudely ploughed fields on either side. The crops growing in them were not impressive. The cart moved over a dirt road which was partly dust and partly mud and altogether ruts and hollows.

"Any chance of our being chased?" asked Hodges. "Are we safe away?"

The senile character on the seat beside the girl cackled uproariously.

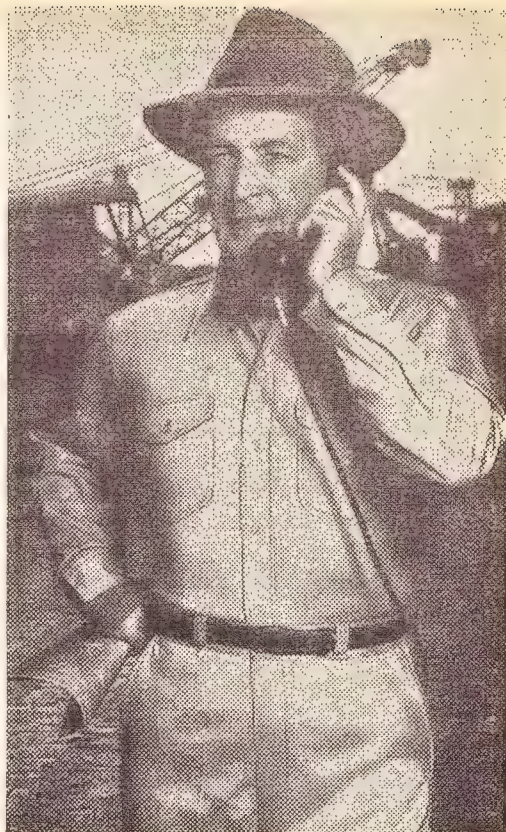
"Nobody," said the girl, "will notice you are gone until they come to execute you. Then they will hunt for Papa Hans, here, to open your cell. Then they will be afraid to tell the Graf that you escaped. And nobody will admit that they saw us go. If the Graf remembers you, he will rage at his alchemist for not hindering hermetic tricks in the castle, and he will give orders for Papa Hans to be put to death when he is caught. But that is all."

THE TURNKEY cackled again. Hodges emerged further from the brush. Fritz, still covered, moaned again. All initiative, all power of movement, seemed to have gone from him.

Hodges staggered upright. The swaying and bumping of the cart was intolerable. He balanced himself precariously, hanging onto the sides of the vehicle as it proceeded at a snail's pace over a highway much worse than anything in Hodges' previous experience.

He stared about. There was a peasant ploughing a field a quarter-mile away. He plodded behind a bullock which drew the plough. The furrow was shallow. The plough itself was made exclusively of wood. It was, in fact, a forked stick with crude accessories. The peas-

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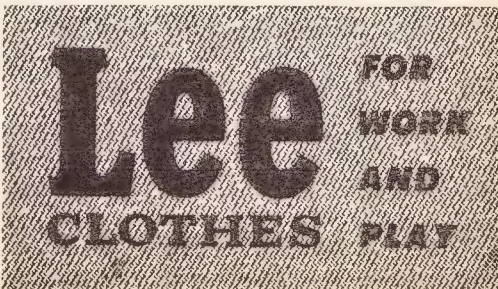
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ant did not wear trousers or shoes. He was clothed in a shapeless bag which came down to his knees, with a cord about his waist. He wore no hat. Bullocks are not used for ploughing in modern Germany. Ploughmen do not wear bags of dirty cloth and nothing else.

"Would you believe," asked Hodges painfully, "that I do not quite understand what has happened and is happening?"

The girl turned around and looked at him. She had very nice blue eyes. But her nose was definitely snub. It looked, if such a thing could be imagined, as if it were artificially snub. It was a little more snub than any nose would normally be.

She regarded Hodges' garments, and the still-dangling, now-battered portable radio. Then she nodded.

"You are an *Auslander*," she said matter-of-factly. The word meant foreigner. "Like Fritz." But Fritz was not a foreigner in Germany! "I think you two came from the underneath world. Yes. I believe that you do not know how people live."

The term "underneath world" rang a bell somewhere in Hodges' mind. But it was a very faint tinkle. He could not place it. And he had reached the point where he simply had to know something. He had had too many lunacies presented as facts, without anything to organize them.

"Then will you tell me how people live?" asked Hodges plaintively. "Why was Katrina chasing Fritz?"

"To marry him," said the girl. She turned back to the antique horse. The grotesque figure beside her slapped his skinny flank and cackled happily.

"Why did she want to marry him when he didn't like the idea?"

"Because she is a witch," explained the girl placidly. "Of course, what she really does—she and her sister too—is make hermetic things. She makes hermetic gold, and rich ladies come to her for young bodies. She will make Papa Hans a young body. That was what I

bribed him with. She does what witches do. So she wants a husband. She has already had seventeen."

Hodges cast a despairing glance around him. But this was not the Germany he had known. This was a Germany in a state of primitive agriculture and—by evidence of the castle of Goslar—in a state of civilization approximating the Middle Ages.

He did not know how he had gotten here. He had no faintest idea how to get out. But he was apparently in some difficulties. He had been scheduled for execution by a method which involved being wrapped around a wheel with his arms and legs broken to match the rim, and with other unpleasant things done to him to make sure that he died. It was a time for the gathering of information leading to practical behavior in view of things as they apparently were.

"Seventeen husbands?" said Hodges. "What happened to them?"

"The Graf had them executed," said the girl without emotion.

"Why?"

"Because they were her husbands," said the girl. She added with a trace of impatience. "*Natürlich!* She is a witch. If the Graf caught her when she did not have a husband, he would execute her. But a woman cannot be executed when she has a husband, because of course a husband is responsible for what his wife does! So the Graf had her husbands executed. But she has kept on doing things for which he could execute her, so she needs a husband to be responsible for what she has done since her last husband was executed. That is why she wants to marry Fritz."

The cart went on for a dozen squeaking revolutions of its wheels. Then the girl added thoughtfully:

"She told her sister Else about you. They live together and they are both witches. Else has had fourteen husbands—all executed by the Graf. That is why I brought you with Fritz. Else intends to marry you."

Hodges opened his mouth and closed

it again. But this was apparently something that Fritz knew about. If it was the local custom, Fritz's desire to get away from even the most luscious of maidens could be understood—considering the maiden's habits.

Then a thought occurred to him.

"Is it a sort of law," he asked painstakingly, "that the Graf can't have anybody executed unless conditions are just right? He was going to have Fritz and me executed for practically no reason at all!"

"You are not a woman," said the girl placidly. "The Graf can execute anybody he wants to, except a married woman."

THE FOREST lay ahead. It was the forest out of which Hodges had ridden double with a trooper of the Graf's guard. The word "Graf" meant, so Hodges understood, a sort of count. In modern Germany the term had no significance except to snobs. But here—wherever here was—a graf had all the powers of a despot of the Middle Ages. So, if one accepted a few entirely impossible guesses, the lunacy began to make a little sense. But not much.

Hodges, wide-eyed, watched the approaching wood. Only this morning he had hiked out of a modern, sleepy town named Goslar along a modern highway. That town had a castle resembling the one he could see by turning his head. It had a Kaiserhof and a Baker's Hall and a Jacobikirche, and it lay at the foot of a Rammelsburg in no wise different from the one behind him. But it was tumble-down and quite odorless. The one behind him was in strict repair, and smelled to high heaven. The highway he had hiked on followed the meandering line of this cart-trail with precision, but this trail was not modern. Yonder was the forest he had entered, which was a State Forest of the new Reich. There was a bald knob of stone—he turned his head to the left to look—which this morning had been topped by the steel tower of an air-way beacon.

There was nothing there now but the stone.

The shriveled turnkey on the seat of the cart made a cackling comment to the girl with carrotty hair. He laughed uproariously. Hodges said:

"What's so funny?"

"He said," the girl reported, "that my mistress Katrina is going to give him a curly golden beard that the women won't be able to resist. There's a kitchen-maid in the castle who laughed at him for being old. She won't laugh when he gets back there as the handsomest young man in the entire castle—so he says."

Hodges was getting used to the sensation of not being able to believe his own ears. Yet this made a sort of cockeyed tie-in with what the girl had said previously about Katrina and her sister having rich ladies come to them for young bodies. It was, of course, plain insanity. But somewhere in his mind there was a confused conviction that some sort of logical thread could be found in all this insanity if only he could manage to get at it.

The forest drew nearer. The cart-track led into it. Out of the forest, by that track, there now appeared a pack-horse and a man. Pack-horses are not common in modern Germany. This one was loaded with pots and pans and ax-heads and neatly bunched daggers, and small bales of what looked like cloth. The man wore sandals and a leather jerkin. He looked at the cart with veiled eyes. In fact, he turned his head aside so he did not seem to see it as the cart and pack-horse passed each other. The man would have been a travelling peddler—"chapman" would be the term—in the Middle Ages. But this was not the Middle Ages.

The only thing that was really sane was the problem of the unicorn's horn. It had no temperature. Inspiration came to Hodges.

"Tell me," he said absorbedly, "is the horn of the unicorn Katrina rides on a hermetic horn?"

V

THE GIRL looked at him impatiently.

"What else could it be?" she demanded. "My mistress Katrina has had seventeen husbands, and she rides the unicorn!"

For a bare instant bafflement assailed Hodges. Then he remembered the myth that only virgins could touch a unicorn. A married woman would not ride a unicorn. So the horn of this unicorn was a hermetic horn, presumably of hermetic substance. Then a hermetic object could be defined as an object without the property of possessing a temperature, which would mean it could not have atoms or molecules or free electrons in it, which would mean—

Hodges stood blinking in the wallowing cart, thinking with a sort of dizzy excitement as these things began to fit themselves together. The horn of the unicorn was the clue!

The cart went into the forest along the trail. Among the trees, for some reason, the bumpings seemed less severe. After a mile, or thereabouts, there was a little side-trail. It was narrower and even less used than the track from Goslar. The girl in the smock yanked at the horse's reins and turned up the narrower way. Branches reached down to rake at the cart's occupants.

A branch released from the sniggering ancient's body now slapped Hodges in the face. It brought him out of his thoughts and back to the present. He thought of Fritz, burrowed in the brushwood with which the cart was filled, and found Fritz.

Fritz was literally blue and numb and helpless from pure funk. It was the first time Hodges had ever come upon a physical condition which was truly psychosomatic. Fritz was seemingly only half-conscious, and he was limp when Hodges exhumed him and brought him out to the light and air.

"At least," said Hodges encouragingly, "we aren't being executed. Not yet!"

Fritz merely moaned. He was in no shape to be a lively companion, or a helpful one. Hodges found himself frowning helplessly. The shrunken, gleeful old man on the cart-seat beside Anna now fairly bounced and chortled in his glee. The girl drove on with vast composure.

Another mile up the side-road they came to a clearing in the forest. There was a vegetable garden—very neatly hoed, but abominably fenced—and beyond it a house. It was a very large house, but it was in a state of such conspicuous disrepair that one wondered that anybody could live in it.

There was a high-pitched squeal from the house that carried the timbre and quality of a fishwife's voice. It was cracked and ancient. When the girl replied, Hodges noticed for the first time that she had a pleasant voice. The voices of most German women are shrill. This voice was not shrill. The snub-nosed girl calmly called answers to squealed questions from the house.

Katrina appeared. Beside her there was a vision of raven-haired loveliness.

Katrina was lush and blonde and almost super-perfect. But the figure beside her was something to make anybody's heart turn flipflops. At fifty yards, and at forty, and then at twenty, she was ravishing. She was dressed very much like Katrina, in filmy, flowing stuff that looked exquisitely impractical. Her gown was blue and her hair was literally as black as night, with highlights that looked like small glittering stars. Her hair fell in a dark cascading flood down her back and over her shoulders.

This vision wore a peaked headdress like some pictures Hodges had seen—he couldn't remember where—and the headdress took off, as it were, from a golden coronet just above her brows. The coronet was practically identical with the one worn by Katrina.

Then Katrina screeched jovially at the snub-nosed girl. Hodges realized in numb amazement that it was she who had uttered the squealed questions in the fishwife's voice. She moved forward

to meet the approaching cart. And in the same numbed perceptiveness, Hodges saw that she did not move with the graceful, demure self-awareness which a young girl acquires with her first real interest in mirrors. She did not walk lightly, but like an old woman. Still, she was a dream of beauty—though the dark-haired girl was ten times more ravishing, in Hodges' view.

He found his eyes clinging to the dark-haired damsel.

"Who on Earth is that?" he demanded.

Anna glanced over her shoulder at him.

"That is my mistress Else," she said detachedly. "She is my mistress Katrina's sister." Then she added with the same air of remoteness, "She intends to marry you."

Hodges blinked. The ancient turnkey from the castle hopped to the ground. He scuttled toward the two incredibly glamorous figures. Katrina shuffled toward the cart. Her sister stood in the doorway of the mouldering mansion. The turnkey cried out shrilly. He capered.

Anna said without intonation, "I promised that you would give him a young body, Mistress, for releasing the two men."

KATRINA nodded. She turned and squawked at her sister. The dark-haired figure now hobbled forward. And the cart was very near the house now. The girl reined in the horse. Hodges saw Katrina close by. Very close by. Closer than at any time before. And he saw her eyes.

They were blue, as befitted her golden hair. But they were faded. They were bleary. The whites were yellowish. They were not the eyes of a young girl.

The hair stood up on Hodges' head. He stared at the other hobbling figure which looked like an impossibly beautiful girl of seventeen. Her eyes were bleary and aged, too.

"Anna promised me a young body,"

cackled the ancient of the dungeons. "I want a handsome young body with a beautiful golden beard—one that the Graf will never recognize as me! I let them out of the dungeons! You must keep the promise!"

Katrina said in the voice that was so unlike her appearance, "You will have it."

She had reached the tail of the cart now, and looked in at Fritz. Her expression was hardly that of extreme affection. She glared at him with a malevolence past description.

"Ha!" she snarled. "You ran away, eh? You talked to the soldiers, eh? But you shall marry me! Get out!"

Fritz moaned. He was completely paralyzed by fear and horror. He could not rise. The blonde Katrina snarled again. Her hand came from beneath her gown. It held the Mauser with which she had tried so painstakingly to murder Fritz some few hours earlier.

"Get out!" she rasped.

But Fritz's limbs would not support him. Katrina glared briefly at Hodges.

"Bring him!" she snapped.

She stood back, the pistol bearing impartially upon the two of them.

The things that were now in Hodges' mind made his scalp crawl. There was a continuous series of cold chills running up and down his spine. But he got out of the cart and dragged Fritz after him.

Then Fritz managed to stand, his face ashen, precisely like a man on his way to execution. When Katrina pointed the way with the Mauser, Hodges helped him move. It was not the Mauser that caused his obedience now—at least, not entirely. Hodges had suddenly acquired an acute horror of coming into contact with Katrina. He had an equally acute horror of coming into contact with the raven-haired dream with ancient eyes. And this was not causeless horror. He thought he knew why he felt that way. And while it might not be completely reasonable, it was assuredly natural.

The snub-nosed girl, Anna, led the decrepit horse around the end of the

enormous tumbledown mansion. Hodges, supporting Fritz, staggered into the building as the pistol-muzzle directed. The two females followed, gabbling at each other in the voices of incredibly ancient crones.

The interior of the house was abominably dark, and it smelled. Hodges struggled on, supporting Fritz. Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the murkiness within. And then everything became a nightmare. He happened, for example, to be walking beside an extraordinarily large stuffed crocodile on the floor. A little further on, the darkness deepened overhead. He glanced up, and found that he was marching beneath an enormous stuffed bat—its wings yards across—which simply and flatly could not be true.

There was light again. They blundered out into a courtyard of indescribable squalor, with pigs grunting in an odorous, badly-fenced corner. Here, though, there was no trace of delapidation. Facing them were huge stone walls some twenty feet high. In them were iron-barred doors.

Anna reappeared. She opened one of the grillwork doors. There was a windowless room inside. It was a dungeon. If it was not as foul as that in the castle of Goslar, it was simply because it had not been much occupied. Hodges and Fritz hesitated. Katrina screeched at them. Fritz made a panicky lunge forward, away from her voice, into the dungeon. Hodges followed.

The door slammed shut behind them.

It was a relief. Fritz began to shiver, wide-eyed. Hodges clamped his jaw and put out his hand to the wall around him.

It had no temperature. It was neither hot nor cold.

A long time later, after deep meditation, Hodges brought out a cigarette lighter and carefully directed its flame against the wall. He held it there for minutes. Then he touched his finger to the spot that should have become heated.

It did not feel even tepid. It was like the horn of the unicorn.

HODGES drew a deep breath. This was a hermetic dungeon. The unicorn's horn was a hermetic horn. The forest which had suddenly appeared had been a hermetic forest, though a horse could back or sidle through a tree-trunk.

There was hermetic stone—which had no temperature. And there were hermetic trees—which offered no resistance to a solid body passing through them. The term hermetic described objects associated with witchcraft and alchemy. It was not substance of any kind previously known to Hodges, because it had no property of being either hot or cold, and therefore was not composed of neutrons and protons and electrons.

Hodges could make some very specific guesses as to what it had to be—something not associated with ectoplasm.

It was plainly a field of force akin to those fields of force which hold neutrons and protons and electrons together in the form of solid objects. The quantity of actual substance in a solid object is infinitesimal, compared to the empty space between its atoms. The solidity of an object is due to the force-fields that hold atoms and molecules together, but not in actual physical contact. Hermetic objects were pseudo-objects, pseudo-matter, with actual matter left out entirely. They were made of energy alone; force-fields without molecules. They were solidified illusions.

No physicist could be less than fascinated by such a subject. Hodges felt all the enraptured delight in coming upon it that an explorer might find in sighting a new continent.

But there was another angle, too. If force-fields could be as solid as this stone dungeon, or as unsubstantial as the forest through whose trees a daring trooper had ridden, they might also have properties in-between.

Papa Hans had wanted a young body—a hermetic one. Katrina and Else supplied rich ladies with young bodies—hermetic ones. Fritz had first been lured by kegs full of gold pieces which were hermetic. The stuff was protean. It

could take any form or texture or color. Convincing human bodies could be made of it.

They were. The incredibly aged and evil eyes which looked out from the lovely young faces of Katrina and Else were true eyes, but the faces were not true faces. Nor were the youthful forms true. They were not flesh and blood. They were hermetic—artificial. They were pseudo-matter; prosthetic appliances. They were what credulous folk would call magic, and what Hodges would have called impossible a few hours ago. They were a development of physics Hodges had never dreamed of, but which he could vaguely begin to understand, and which he desperately wanted to find learn completely.

Under normal circumstances, a man who had been dragged out of one dungeon ahead of an executioner, and clapped into another to await a marriage, would have been absorbed in his own personal situation. But Hodges could not fix his mind on it. If there were such a thing as hermetic material, force-fields masquerading as matter. . . .

He got out his knife and cut at the wall. He could not even scratch it. But the blade was not dull. It went into the wall for a fraction of an inch, but when it came out, there was no mark. Even using a stabbing motion, he could not get the blade in further.

He worked on the bars, where there was light. He was almost frenziedly irritated that he had no apparatus with which to make tests. Chemical—In theory, the stuff should not combine with anything. Electrical—He feverishly got the battery out of his portable radio and tried to send a current through. It was a non-conductor.

Naturally! It was not matter. It was the force-fields of molecules, minus the molecules themselves. It would not melt or burn or change, yet it could have different physical properties. Hodges began feverishly to speculate that if the beam of a cathode-ray tube were shot into it, the tiny particles would be cap-

tured. It might absorb any corpuscular energy. To have color, it must absorb some wavelengths of light. It could conceivably grasp and capture neutrons as it must selectively entrap photons.

VI

IN MINUTES Hodges could think of questions about the stuff that would call for months, or years, of research. How was it made? What created it? How was it given form?

When sunset drew near, Hodges was sitting on the floor of the dungeon, biting his nails in pure intellectual frustration, still occasionally trying for the thousandth time to scratch or mark or separate however tiny a particle of hermetic material from the wall of his cell.

He couldn't. A hermetic object was not divisible into parts. All of it was one thing, as a magnetic field is one thing. One could no more remove part of a hermetic object than one could remove part of a magnetic field.

The scientific angle filled Hodges' mind so completely that he hardly noticed his surroundings. When the dim sunlight in the cell began to die, he hardly noticed it.

He did pay heed, however, when torchlight played in through the bars of the now-dark dungeon. He stared. The girl Anna with the snub nose and the carroty hair approached the cell with a pot of food in her hands. The torch was carried by a male figure with a beautiful golden beard. His expression was one of acute despair. The bearded figure moved in the shuffling manner of the ancient turnkey, but utterly without his elation. The girl said composedly:

"You open the door, Papa Hans."

The ancient, doleful voice of the turnkey came dismally from the body of a splendidly proportioned youth.

"The bars are heavy."

"No, Papa Hans," said the girl. "Push them aside."

The youthful figure—as handsome, in its way, as the figures of Katrina and

Else—wheezed and puffed and moved the bars aside. It opened the door.

The girl entered the cell. Hodges stared at the seemingly young man now holding the torch. He looked magnificently young and virile. But he moved with the creaking gait of senility. His eyes, even in the torchlight, were not young eyes. They were the bewildered, bleary, now-unhappy eyes of the turnkey from Goslar.

Hodges said, fascinated, "He got his young body, eh?"

The girl put down the platter of food. It was not appetizing, but the plate was clean. She nodded.

"I thought," said Hodges, staring, "that he meant to go back to the castle and work havoc among the kitchen maids."

The girl said briefly, "His real body is inside the hermetic one, and it is still old. His voice is old. Nobody would ever think him anything but what he is. He would be seized within minutes and executed as the Graf executes people he catches wearing hermetic bodies. So Papa Hans is staying here to serve my mistresses. He cannot do anything else. Anywhere else he goes he would be killed."

"Why doesn't he take the false body off?"

The girl said impatiently, "Who can change hermetic things, except the witches and wizards and alchemists who make them? He will look like this all his life, and even when he dies his hermetic body will be unchanged."

Hodges bit at his nails. Somehow, he did not think of escape, though the door was open and there was only a girl and a doddering old man in an artificial body.

"Besides," added the girl calmly, "if he tried to run away and my mistresses caught him, they would change his hermetic body into something else. Else told him she would make his body into a big spider if he tried to flee."

Hodges saw, with enormous excitement, that this was possible. The stuffed crocodile he'd seen might be a hermetic

crocodile's body around a victim of this exotic art. The monstrous bat might be another.

Among primitive people—but how did a part of Germany remain so primitive?—there would be no idea of using forcefields like this for practical purposes. Women like Katrina and Else would think of pseudo-substance as offering opportunity for strictly personal malevolences and vanities. But Hodges could see it from a modern, scientific, practical point of view. If one could make bridges, build dams, erect houses create pipelines and highways without mining and smelting and hauling material. . . .

Suddenly, he had no purpose half so urgent as learning how to use this misused technique for a modern age. Not even escape seemed nearly so important.

But only an hour later he discovered why it was quite impossible for hermetic principles—whatever they were—to be used for slum clearance and irrigation and other idealistic purposes in a normal world.

An hour later, with a gasp, he fell four feet through the dissolving floor of his dungeon. He fell solidly to bare ground underneath it. He lay astonishedly in the open, under the stars, his prison vanished. The mansion had vanished. He was in a clearing in what should have been, but was not, a German State Forest, and there was a fire some forty or fifty feet away which had apparently been dropped from at least as great a height as himself.

Two incredibly ancient crones, clad in rags, were leaping up from their tumblers with shrieks of terror. From somewhere else the turnkey of Goslar came running. He no longer possessed a young body. He was exactly as he had been in the dungeons of the castle, and he fled in the desperate, halting manner of the old and decrepit. He vanished in the darkness.

HODGES knew immediately what had happened, and why. He knew what had destroyed the pseudo-matter of the

prison and the hermetic body of Papa Hans, and the illusory beauty of Katrina and her sister Else. Seen in the fire-light they looked like witches, old and shriveled and malignant even in their panic. He heard Fritz gasp beside him.

Then Hodges grabbed in one hand the thing which had destroyed the witchcraft, the hermetic stuff, the solidified illusions of the two beldames. With the other hand he grabbed Fritz.

Fritz could move. Gasping and choking, he ran with Hodges. The two of them pelted away into the night.

They came close to making a four-minute mile away from the place where Katrina and her ancient sister screeched beside a scattered fire. Then they found themselves at the place where the trail from Goslar split and part of it led to the now-vanished mansion and dungeons. They found themselves, too, quite unable to run another step.

Fritz collapsed and lay in the high grass, sobbing for breath. Hodges sat down more gingerly, gasping. But he tenderly slung his portable radio about his shoulder again. It was the device that had dissolved the dungeon walls. At the same instant it had caused the floors and roof of the delapidated mansion to shiver and cease to be, so that the fire by which the two sisters had sat was dropped from its vanished fireplace and scattered about the non-hermetic and perfectly natural ground underneath.

The happening could be considered reasonable, when viewed by afterthought. In the sister's private prison, Hodges had racked his brains for further conclusions to be drawn from the information he had. He had gotten nowhere. He knew what hermetic objects must be—and so had a sort of explanation all the way back to the horn of the unicorn—without any idea about how they could be made. He knew that they must be force-fields like those of ordinary matter, but minus matter-particles like atoms and molecules. But he could not go on from there.

So he'd turned his thoughts to the second insane part of his predicament. That was the disappearance of a highway and a modern town, and all the aspects of modernity in a number of square miles of territory and the lives of some thousands of Germans.

A place where horsemen wore cuirasses and people followed the fashions of the Middle Ages was as unlikely, in its way, as pseudo-matter.

So presently Hodges had turned on his portable radio to assure himself that there was a modern Germany; that normal people lived normal, civilized lives somewhere. The radio should have proven it. But it hadn't. The set had produced no sounds; no music, no station identifications. When the tubes had warmed up the dungeon evaporated around him and he fell four feet to the ground. Then he'd fled with Fritz.

He guessed that the various batterings the set had undergone had broken it, so that it did not operate as a receiver but oscillated wildly when in use. He believed it had become a generator of unmodulated radio waves. If that was true, then radio-frequency oscillations broke down the force-field patterns which were hermetic objects.

With daylight, Hodges hoped to make sure of his theory. Meanwhile, it was cheering to believe it.

But—where was he? What particular form of Teutonic insanity kept a part of Germany in the Middle Ages? Why hadn't it been noticed and reported before? How was it that Fritz could say that it was a pathway to East Germany which smugglers used without encountering Soviet frontier guards? Why did ploughmen wear filthy cloth bags, and plough with forked sticks instead of ploughs?

He sat still, breathing deeply to get back his strength. The night sounds were completely normal all around him. There was a faint breeze in the trees overhead. There were insects making not very intelligent noises in the darkness. The normality of the sky and

woods and sounds was itself an oddity to Hodges, after what had happened today.

Presently he heard a horse. It came slowly and sedately along the cart-trail from Goslar. A cart wheel squeaked rhythmically. Hodges controlled his breathing to listen. The squeaking sound was familiar. He had ridden out of the castle in a cart which made just such a sound.

THE CART turned to go up the trail to the now-vanished mansion. Fritz made sobbing, gasping sounds.

The horse was reined in. The snub-nosed girl's voice said sympathetically: "Papa Hans? Did you run away?"

Hodges hesitated for two heart-beats. Then he jumped out into the road and caught the horse's head. He said grimly:

"The man who sobs is Fritz, Anna. I am the other *Auslander*. And I need information from you! I will not harm you, but you must tell me some things. What lies to the north of us?"

The snub-nosed girl seemed to be breathless with amazement.

"How did you escape?"

"What lies to the north?" snapped Hodges.

"The lands of the Duke Bertrand, and then the Margrave's marches," said Anna. "But how—"

"To the east?" demanded Hodges.

"The mountain forests, then King Luitpold's kingdom, and then strange lands. How did you escape?"

"South! What lies south!"

"The Two Duchies, and then the Emperor's lands, but they are many days' journey."

"West!" snapped Hodges.

"To the west is Franconia. It is two weeks' journey to cross it."

Hodges said indignantly, "Do you mean to tell me that one can travel for a week to the north, south, east and west, and still not reach a railroad or a modern town or any place where people live more sanely than you people do? Where is the other town of Goslar? The other

town! Where the castle is tumble-down and there is a very bad railroad!"

The girl did not even try to answer this. She said tensely:

"How did you escape? There is always a forest of brambles set about my mistress' house at night. How did you get through? If you have escaped, you must run fast! My mistress Katrina is terrible when she is angry, and my mistress Else is no kinder! They killed poor Friedrich only for being kind to me!"

Hodges scowled in the darkness, and said:

"She won't kill us! The house has vanished; there are no brambles and there are no prison cells. Papa Hans has his old body back, and Katrina and Else are two old women who scream at each other before a fire."

The girl caught her breath.

"Truly? Ah, that is good! The Graf's alchemist must have done it! Now the soldiers will catch them! They are on the way here now! I was taking the news, but now I will run away instead!"

She made noises to the horse. It tried to back up, but Hodges held it fast.

"Soldiers are coming to take them, and you won't warn them?" he said.

"If you knew!" cried Anna with sudden fierceness. "If you knew what they have done! I myself have seen murders! I myself have seen their crimes!"

She ground her teeth. Hodges stood irresolute. But he definitely did not want to face the monstrous hag who had worn a young girl's body.

"Aren't you a witch, too?" he demanded.

"No!" cried Anna fiercely. "I was given to them to be their servant! Everybody was afraid to harm me because the witches would take revenge. But everybody was afraid to be kind to me! I could not do anything but remain their servant! Now I will be executed for serving them if the Graf's soldiers truly catch them! I must run away!"

Hodges still hesitated.

"Please!" said Anna desperately. "Let me go! Soldiers will be here soon!"

"You have a horse and cart," said Hodges. "If you will let us ride with you, it's a deal. We can do with a little distance from this place, if there are soldiers coming! Incidentally, it wasn't the Graf's alchemist who destroyed the house and unhatched Katrina's hermetic possessions. I did it."

The girl caught her breath again. She clucked to the horse and backed the cart out of the side-trail. She stopped.

"We should hurry!" she said anxiously.

Hodges went to the tall grass where Fritz lay, still gasping.

"We have a taxi, Fritz. Come along!"

He hauled Fritz to his feet and then boosted him into the cart. The brushwood it had carried that morning was gone. Fritz sank into a panting heap in the corner. The girl clucked to the horse. It went sedately up the narrow track.

"How," asked the girl absorbedly, "did you destroy all the hermetic things? I would like to know how to do that!"

Hodges was suddenly very tired. Not only physically, but his brain was weary of the dispute within itself, in which one part so vigorously denied everything that another part observed. The movement of the cart was now almost comfortable. Even the excruciating rhythmic squeak of its right wheel was tolerable to a man as worn out as Hodges.

"It is a matter of high-frequency electro-magnetic oscillations," he said, and yawned, "produced by a cascade-

linked series of triode tubes set oscillating by a feed-back that I suspect is due to a broken condenser."

The girl said interestedly:

"What is an oscillation? What is an electro and a magnetic, and what is—"

VII

THE HORSE clip-clopped onward through the trail in the dark forest. About them were very untidy trees. Around them night insects sang their individually tuneless songs. There were soft rustlings of tree branches above them, stirred by a gentle wind. Through this they moved with the right wheel squeaking loudly at each revolution.


Hodges silenced the girl's questions to ask questions of his own. Hermetic things could be made. Not only witches but alchemists and wizards could make them. But how? Anna's reply was precise but lacking in essential data. Hodges was desperately impatient with it, but he did believe she'd told all she knew. Well then, he demanded, if the Graf himself had hermetic objects made by his alchemist, why did he object to witches making them?

The answer to that was equally precise. Years ago, the Graf's countess had been captured by a wizard. The Graf had been forced to empty his treasury to ransom her from captivity. Then he'd summoned other witches and wizards and alchemists to recover his treasure

[Turn page]

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and destroy the wizard. But they used their hermetic powers to rob him of what he had left. In the end, in pure desperation, he'd made peace with his original enemy, who got rid of the others for him. Then the Graf discovered that his small daughter had been carried away as a hostage by his original enemy, lest he resume hostilities.

From that time on, the Graf had persecuted witches and wizards within his realm with a frantic vengefulness. His one longing was to exterminate the tribe. He did tolerate one tame alchemist for purposes of state—to make bridges on which he could collect tolls, to create magnificent decorations when an appearance of state was desirable, and on occasion to aid in the ferreting out of other alchemists and wizards by his arts. But that alchemist's life was not an enviable one.

"The Graf's wife," added Anna matter-of-factly, "died of grief when her little daughter was stolen away. So now he hates witches very much—witches and wizards."

Hodges tried to digest the incredible tale. Presently he said:

"Can witches and wizards do anything besides make and unmake this hermetic stuff?"

Anna was candidly skeptical. So far as she knew, witchcraft and wizardry in practise meant only the creation of hermetic objects. But Anna did not believe that witches could really do anything else. What they could do was enough.

"Too much," said Hodges dourly. "What you've been telling me sounds like a fairy tale. Only I saw some of it! Let me think!"

He fell silent, trying to make sense of things, trying to extract rational scientific conclusions from inexact and unscientific observations by a girl with a snub nose.

But he was worn out, not only by fatigue but bewilderment. As the cart went creaking through an eerie primi-

tive forest, his thoughts were dulled by weariness. Even the squeaking of the wheel faded gradually to nothingness in his ears. He slept.

He awakened shortly after dawn. He was stiff, and he ached in every bone and muscle. For a moment he did not realize where he was—only that he was acutely uncomfortable. The cart moved slightly. Hodges stirred, sat up, and gazed around.

Anna, the snub-nosed girl, was asleep on the driver's seat of the two-wheeled cart. Fritz snored, sprawled out in the bed of the vehicle. The horse had ceased to travel some time before, and now grazed at leisure in a tiny open space beside the road. The morning made all the world look very bright and new.

The roadside clearing was almost at the edge of a long descent of the highway. It wound and twisted downhill into the distance, between the mountains. These were the Hartz Mountains. They were not impressive as mountains. Their slopes were gentle and their tops were rounded and mild. But there were dawn-mists on the hillsides, and haze lay deep in the valleys, while pinkish morning sunshine slanted over the whole landscape and saturated everything in a tranquil beauty.

At first, Hodges could not see sign of habitation anywhere. Then he saw a small, thin curl of smoke rising as if from a chimney in the forest far below.

IMMEDIATELY, the thought of food being cooked came into Hodges' mind, and on the instant he was ravenously hungry. He had eaten breakfast the day before, and in Katrina's dungeon Anna had brought some food. But now he looked at the thread of smoke and had visions of fried eggs and pancakes and coffee.

He got down to the ground to straighten his kinked muscles. He found himself recalling the events of the day before, and found a deep skepticism arising in him. Such things couldn't have happened! But they very obvious-

ly had, because here he was.

He saw, suddenly, very far away, the slender Gothic towers of an edifice which was different indeed from the stocky design of the castle in Goslar. This looked like a fairy tale palace, with pointed roofs atop each slender tower, with many windows high above the reach of arrows, with great walls rising above the surrounding forest. It was perched very near to a mountain top. No flags flew from it. If there were other signs of life, it was too far to see. It was at least six miles away, and it looked impossibly beautiful and romantic.

Hodges shook his head. Then he saw that Anna had waked, and was regarding him speculatively. She had very clear and honest blue eyes, but she was snub-nosed and freckle-faced, and her hair was of a preposterous carrotty hue. The smock she wore was clean enough, but it was shapeless. He said politely:

"Good-morning, Anna."

She nodded. "I still do not understand," she said thoughtfully, "what you were telling me about high-frequency electromagnetic oscillations, and how they destroy hermetic things."

Hodges fidgeted.

"I'll have to show you," he observed. Then he said, "Would that smoke be a village? And what's that castle?"

She looked at the smoke.

"That is an inn," she explained. "For travellers. If we have money, we can buy food there." Then she regarded the distant castle with reserve. "Nobody really knows about the castle. There is a forest of brambles about it. Nobody can get to it. Some say that it is the castle of the wizard who stole the Graf's countess, years ago. But no one knows surely."

"Wouldn't there," asked Hodges ironically, "even be a legend of an enchanted princess in it?"

Anna considered carefully, and then shook her head.

"I do not know of such a tale," she said seriously. "But it would not be

true, anyhow. There is no enchantment. Hermetic things are not enchantment. If you know how to make them, you do, and the Graf executes you if he catches you."

"At least you have no superstitions!" said Hodges. "That comes of being behind the scenes. Are you hungry?"

"I starve!" acknowledged Anna.

"Then let's go get some breakfast."

They awakened Fritz, who groaned at the stiffness of his muscles and bones, and was dispirited when he found how far they had come. He would have preferred to go directly to the place where he had entered the smuggling route to East Germany. Then he was sure they could get back to normal times and places. But he also stated that they had only to travel at a right angle to the smuggling route—which ran east—in order to get back to normal Germany.

Hodges' reason concurred, but there was a part of his mind which was getting used to irrationality. That part of him doubted.

They got the cart in motion again and headed down the long incline toward the smoke in the forest. Hodges asked more questions of Anna. She talked freely enough. She did not remember when she had not been a servant of Katrina and Else. Certainly it had been from the time when she was a very small child. Everybody knew whose servant she was, so nobody dared harm her. But everybody was too much afraid of Else and Katrina to be kind to her, either.

There were rich women who sometimes came secretly to the two witches to be made young and beautiful. They had hermetic bodies formed over their own. Hodges got a vague impression of a flexible exterior coating of pseudo-material, perfectly simulating flesh, in which their aging carcasses were enclosed. He found objections to the thought. There was such a matter as perspiration to be taken care of. There was the matter of cleanliness. But the people in this peculiar area did not think much about cleanliness. There must be

some way for sweat and other bodily excretions to be disposed of.

The girl Anna also spoke candidly of various murderous performances she had witnessed. A woman had maneuvered a young man—who scorned her love—into the hands of the two sisters. They formed a hermetic body about his natural one. But it was not a human body—it was a man-sized lizard's. In it, he could crawl. He could also talk, so they kept him in a cage of hermetic-iron bars, until he died because he could not feed himself.

THERE was the boy Friedrich. He was given to the witches for a servant by somebody who wanted to get rid of him. He had been two years older than Anna. Once, when Katrina beat the girl, he flew to her defense with a stick of firewood.

"Katrina formed a hermetic boulder around him," said Anna, "and rolled it down a mountainside. He must have suffocated when the stone closed about him. I cried for days, and Katrina or Else beat me every time they saw me weeping. So after that I did not dare ever feel sorry for anyone."

Her conversation was both appalling and pathetic. It had the macabre quality of a story of witchcraft as pictured in the fairy tales Hodges had read as a little boy. Those fairy tales came mostly from Germany, he remembered; from the Brothers Grimm. But as Anna talked of things which would be called lunacy in a saner world, her manner was not awed. It was completely prosaic. She talked rather like a laboratory assistant, describing technical operations she had witnessed but not understood.

She could not describe any device, any machine, which produced hermetic material and objects. She did refer to a liquid, an elixir, which did not seem to make sense. Still, among people so backward technically that they used torches and candles for light, and had no source of power but the muscles of men and horses and bullocks, there would nat-

urally be no idea of devices in a modern sense.

Medieval and ancient civilizations had had the idea of tools—hammers, saws, hoists, ploughs—which helped men do things more easily. But modern civilization is based upon the fact that machines—motors, dynamos, microphones, telescopes—can do things that men cannot do at all.

These people would not have any idea that any sort of device could make hermetic objects. They might discover a novel property of some compound by pure accident. They never made devices to do things, like printing-presses or radios. They only made tools to help, like windlasses and bellows.

Hodges bit his nails in frustration. A liquid which produced hermetic objects was out of reason! As a physicist instead of a chemist, he would be badly handicapped in investigating anything like that!

They came to the inn. It was crude and filthy. When they went inside, there were villainous-looking men eating and drinking, and the smell was overpowering. Hodges gagged and went out quickly. Fritz stood it better. He came out, presently, with beer and bread. He had paid for them with coins—paper currency was valueless—which were regarded with deep suspicion and accepted on a bullion basis only. German coins—West German coins—were unknown in this part of Germany. The fact roused hysterical unease in Fritz.

"We have to get back to sensible Germany!" he said feverishly. "This is not even the smuggling route to the East Zone! This place I did not see or hear about. Where are we?"

Hodges looked at Anna. She said:

"During the night we came three leagues. We traveled north. We are near the lands of the Duke Bertrand. I do not know where you wish to go."

Hodges grimly observed:

"If we are three leagues north of Goslar we should have crossed an autobahn. We should have heard planes flying

overhead. Up this valley there should be a railroad."

"What," asked Anna, "is a railroad?"

Hodges spread out his hands. Fritz looked nervously—perhaps longingly—back along the way they had come. He knew where he had entered the smuggling route to East Germany. Maybe he thought of returning to that exact spot as the only sure way to get back where he belonged. But his eyes bugged out at what he saw. He pointed and made despairing sounds.

Still far away, but identified by the glinting of sunlight on steel caps and cuirasses, were horsemen on the way down the trail the cart had so recently descended. They were perhaps two miles back, but as they rode two abreast across a mountain-shoulder they were plainly recognizable as troopers. They would have to be the soldiers of the Graf von Goslar's guard, with whom Hodges and Fritz had already had something to do. They carried lances. They would travel faster than a single leisurely horse hauling a cart loaded with three people.

"They did not catch my mistresses, and the house was gone," said Anna regretfully. "But they saw the marks of the cart wheels on the road. They must believe that my mistresses ran away in the cart, so they have followed. Not many carts use this road. They will be disappointed that Else and Katrina are not here."

"I won't worry about their disappointment!" snapped Hodges. "They are the men who were going to hang me! Then they changed their minds to something more lingering! We've got to get out of here!"

But before he could make a move, there was a yelping sound of warning within the inn. On the instant there was an eruption of the villainous characters Hodges had seen inside. There seemed to be dozens of them, of all shapes and sizes. They boiled out of the doors and bolted for the forest.

Fritz joined the flight. He ran like a

deer. Hodges, after one gulp of beer, followed him. By pure instinct, he grabbed the snub-nosed girl's hand and dragged her after him.

VIII

MUCH LATER, Hodges and Anna came cautiously out upon a rock outcrop on the hillside. They could look down over tree tops and see the inn, now small and far below. The horses of the troopers were still clustered about the roughly-built structure. They saw windows flung open. Things came crashing out.

"Looking for Katrina and Else," observed Hodges. "And looting a little on the side. What next?"

"They will go back," said Anna. "They do not know that Katrina and Else were not in the cart. But they will be afraid to go in the forest after them. Hermetic objects can be used best as weapons when there are trees to fasten them to. So the soldiers will go back to Goslar with a tale of dreadful perils they could not overcome. And afterward, Katrina and Else will be more feared than ever."

"The soldiers will take your horse," objected Hodges.

"But not me!" said Anna. "If they caught me now, they would—"

She named, almost casually, the manner in which the Graf would cause her to be executed. Hodges' hair stood on end.

"I won't let that happen!" he said savagely. "Come on! I don't know where we're going, but—"

He turned. Then he stopped. There were three men regarding him with blandly insolent smiles. They were excessively dirty. They were extensively whiskered. One of them had a sword in his hand. The others were armed with knives. They grinned at Hodges.

"Who are these characters?" demanded Hodges.

"They are b-brigands," said Anna faintly. Hodges glanced at her, but she had not changed color in the least. Her freckles stood out exactly as before,

neither more nor less.

He scowled at the trio. They looked like the ruffians who had scuttled out of the inn at the alarm of soldiers on the way.

"What do you want?" snapped Hodges.

"We will take your money," said the man with the sword. "And your clothes, because they are good. And your boots, because they are excellent. The maiden is not well-favored, but we need a cook. And indeed—"

He was almost within swords' length when Hodges exploded into action. Hodges was unarmed. In such cases, great informality in combat techniques is essential to success. Hodges took one step and kicked the swordsman in the belly before he could raise his weapon for a slash. The slash was never delivered. Hodges snatched up the weapon and leaped at the next nearest of the three. He laid that man's arm open with the blade, and as the hurt man roared, Hodges leaped at the third of the brigands. But that man was quick. He was already running away. Hodges chased him thirty yards and got in a satisfying slash across his rump before he gave up the pursuit and returned to Anna.

"Now let's get away from here," he said angrily. "No, wait!"

Anna stooped and picked up the knife dropped by the wounded man. He was on his way elsewhere. They could hear the crashing of brushwood where he ran. The man who'd had the sword now gasped and strangled on the ground.

"They didn't like Fritz's money at the inn," observed Hodges. "Let's see what this man has."

There were half a dozen gold pieces and a mass of copper coins in the brigand's possession. Hodges pocketed them.

"I don't usually rob people," he said pleasantly, "but this time my need is greater than thine."

He beckoned to Anna. He took a last look down at the inn. The soldiers were forming up again, outside it. Smoke be-

gan to billow out of the windows. Two of the soldiers tried to get on their horses, and fell off again. Others, still afoot, staggered visibly. Drunk. The beverages of the inn had authority.

Hodges headed away as the thread of smoke from the inn's chimney became a dense cloud. The soldiers had tried to discourage witchcraft by burning down the building outside which a cart belonging to two known witches had been found. Anna followed docilely.

Presently Hodges said in vexation:

"I won't say that my plans are upset, because I haven't any. But this is the devil of a state to be in!"

It was. To be afoot and armed only with a sword, without friends or resources of any kind—except a malfunctioning portable radio—in an unbelievably medieval section of Germany was bad enough. To be among people who had never heard of America or railroads or electricity, and naturally not of two world wars, was without precedent. To be without a background or a trade by which to earn a living here, and to have no idea how to get back to a more rational world, was unsettling.

Hodges would have felt acutely insecure in any case. But to be lost in a rugged forest which maintained a choice assortment of cutthroats did not help. To have no destination was not inspiring. Hodges really needed to take stock. But there was nothing to take stock of.

They did need to get away from this neighborhood of brigands, though. He and Anna climbed and hiked across wooded terrain for nearly an hour, because brigands would be watching mostly along the road. The ruggedness and wildness of the forest was as unreasonable as anything else. There should be hamlets in view from the hilltops. There was only wilderness—save for the one glamorous, idealized castle. Once Hodges heard a snuffling sound he could have sworn was a bear.

Anna toiled after him. Presently he relented.

"Rest a while," he commanded. "I want to think."

SHE SAT on a boulder. He hauled out his booty of coins from the brigand and examined them. No single one of them was familiar or referred to a known political entity entitled to issue coins. Then he grimaced and bounced a gold piece on the boulder on which Anna sat.

"No temperature. But it rings and it has weight." He explained gravely, "The force-field it is composed of interacts with the force-fields of real matter, like real matter does. But it's a hermetic counterfeit. I'll show you how to destroy hermetic things."

He laid down the gold piece and swung his battered radio before him. Then Anna jumped. With a little gasp, she pointed.

There was a house in view a quarter-mile away. It was a rather attractive house. It was hard to believe that they could have failed to notice it before. It was a neat, rose-covered cottage, complete with chimney and diamond-paned windows. It stood on the hillside beyond them, and it looked as if it had been there forever.

But it hadn't.

Hodges got up slowly. His hackles tended to rise.

"I don't remember seeing that!" he said. He stared at the small, thatch-roofed structure. It looked extremely attractive. "I think I'll take a look at it. Will you come, or stay here?"

"I will do as you say," said Anna uneasily.

"Wait here, then," he told her. "Keep that knife handy."

He moved carefully toward the newly-appeared building. As he approached, he saw that it was very remarkable indeed. The flowers were not flowers, but enameled jewelry. The door was veined onyx. The door-frames appeared to be silver. As a structure, it was completely impossible. But to a certain type of mind such lavish appearance of costly

materials would paralyze reason.

Hodges reflected sardonically that the local brigands would undoubtedly find a house like this irresistible. It also occurred to him that if he and Anna had been children, quite possibly the house would have appeared to be made of gingerbread, with sugar-icing roof and candy flowers.

As a lure, it impressed Hodges as naive.

With a certain tight-lipped uneasiness, he moved toward it. He was sure that it was solidified illusion—hermetic stuff. His right hand held the sword ready. But his left was at the button of his portable radio. He stopped short, ten feet from the house. He turned on his radio. It would take a few seconds for the tubes to warm.

One second. Two. The house moved. What appeared to be an opaque casting-net materialized above Hodges. It descended, to enclose him helplessly in darkness beneath leathery folds.

But as it descended, it shivered and vanished. He stood in the open, and there was untrodden ground where the house had seemed to be. He was again in bright sunshine.

With grim relief, Hodges turned off the radio. He glanced back at Anna. She sat tensely watching.

Suddenly, terribly, there were cobwebs all about Hodges. They were fine as the finest silk, but they were about him by the millions. He could not hope to force his way through them. He could not see a foot from his nose. Any movement would entangle him hopelessly.

He turned on the radio set. One second, and they vanished. He turned it off again. He felt a peculiar familiarity in this unreasonable behavior. There was a story in the Green Fairy Book—or was it the Yellow?—that he'd read as a child. It was about a prince who was trying to get into a castle tower in which a princess was imprisoned. The way was barred by just such cobwebs. The prince exhausted himself, vainly to win through, before he re-

called a talisman, or charm, which cleared the way. Hodges' charm, of course, was a six-tube battery radio receiver, retailing at \$39.75 at stores in the United States, and it most likely did what it did because a condenser had gone bad and it oscillated instead of received.

Suddenly there was quicksand, rising about his knees. He did not sink in the ground, that remained firm beneath his feet, but sand appeared, glistening wet and surging upward. It rose in a dome-shaped mound, ten yards across, clinging to his legs. If he had struggled, he would have fallen under its surface. There, of course, he would have drowned, or would have been fished out after he was sufficiently subdued.

Hodges did not struggle. He turned on the radio set.

It did not take more than a second to warm up, this time. The quicksand vanished.

Hodges considered that two things could happen now. Creatures like Katrina and Else, of course, would either run away or continue desperately to try to overthrow him. But Hodges had a peculiar and illogical hunch. He considered that women witches would not act like men wizards. Being women, they would always respond to the social pressure of their environment. They would not only act as witches were supposed to act, but in the exact sort of stage setting the public demanded. So they lived in monstrous squalor.

But a man wizard would be quite different. A man would use the power to solidify illusions either in politics, to become a king and practice the grossest of sensualities, or else he would adopt a professional—even an artistic—attitude toward his work: A woman might be a good witch or a bad one. A man would become in some sense either a wizard-politician or an artist-technician. And the dreamlike castle hereabouts suggested the product of a competent wizard with a masculine, artistic viewpoint.

So Hodges waited.

After a moment or so he fished in his pocket—with one hand only—and brought out a packet of cigarettes. He put one in his mouth and snapped his lighter. He smoked. He hadn't smoked since he saw the unicorn for the first time. He'd been too busy. And anyhow, these were American cigarettes, and the carton in his pack under the raincoat had to last him until he could get to an American occupation post and arrange a slight relaxation of regulations at the PX.

But he smoked now. He doubted profoundly that Germans who had never heard of America would know anything about smoking or cigarette lighters. To a man who dealt in force-fields substituting for matter, the idea of creating a flame at one's finger-tips and drawing smoke into one's lungs and puffing it out again without strangling would smack of magic more authentic than his own.

It did. There was a sound of moving branches. A man came out into view. He was taller than Hodges. He wore a somewhat shabby suit of velvet in what looked like a fancy-dress mode. He had a very neatly trimmed beard. He wore a heavy golden—or hermetic-gold—chain about his neck. He looked uneasily at Hodges.

"Your pardon," he said uncomfortably. "I did not know that I practiced my arts upon a fellow wizard, and a great one."

Hodges said amiably:

"I was not offended. I was entertained. I believe that is your castle yonder?"

THE MAN in the shabby velvet suit said painfully:

"Ja. I am Gebhardt." He hesitated, and went on, "Of Castle Unconquerable."

Hodges grinned. He left the grin on just long enough for this Gebhardt to see it. Hodges actually believed that no hermetic castle could be considered unconquerable against a man with a

slightly cockeyed \$39.75 portable radio. But there was no need to rub it in.

"I," he said, "am Hodges of Manhassett. I have traveled far. It is a great pleasure to meet a wizard of such competence and courtesy as yourself. Indeed, the purpose of my journeying is to meet and exchange professional information with other practitioners of our art."

"I beg," said Gebhardt uneasily, "that you will be my guest. So great a wizard—"

Hodges nodded. He would be in no greater danger in an illusory castle than lost in a forest on a world he strongly suspected was not the one he was used to. Even Anna would be safer where he, Hodges, was soundly feared.

"That," he said, "was my hope. I will call my servant." He beckoned to Anna. "I got her," he added, "from the ladies Katrina and Else, near Goslar."

"The dear girls!" said Gebhardt, beaming. "How are they?"

"Else," said Hodges severely, "tried to get me to marry her. I was forced to destroy her quarters and all her hermetic objects. Such presumption! Such folly!"

Gebhardt swallowed. Then he said, "It is natural for women to be foolish—"

He turned his eyes to Anna, and went white about the gills—evidently recognizing her. He looked at Hodges, and the color came slowly back into his face. The respect in his manner was increased markedly as he led the way through the forest, but from time to time he seemed to tremble just a little.

They walked a mile, and then two. Hodges reflected comfortably that Anna was right. There was truly no such thing as magic; else a wizard capable of the castle he'd seen would have had at least a carriage drawn by dragons to save himself the trouble of walking. Two miles from the point of their encounter, there appeared another evidence of the limitations of solidified illusions for practical living.

They came to a cottage not too dissimilar to the one Hodges had destroyed by turning on his radio. This, however, was of quite ordinary materials, and so less likely to arouse suspicion of its hermetic nature. It was an absolutely convincing woodman's hut, with a gleaming axe leaning against the wall by the door, a great stack of wood close by, and even chips on the ground indicative of wood cut smaller for burning on a hearth. The door was closed, and it looked like a dwelling whose owner had gone away shortly before, and in which some beer or other refreshment might be found.

"You will pardon me," said Gebhardt politely. "I have great trouble with servants. I have to trap them. The door here is closed so I have evidently caught another."

Hodges kept impassive. The man in the shabby velvet suit brought a small brass object from his cloak. It was a small, four-sided, pyramidal brass bottle, some five inches tall and one and a half across its base. At the top there was a stopper with some apparatus on it. The wizard of Castle Unconquerable pressed his thumb upon the stopper. There was an infinitesimal thread of glistening liquid which poured out upon one of the bottle's flat sides. Gebhardt blew upon it, with his eyes on the cottage.

The cottage slowly ceased to be itself; its outer surfaces evaporated with considerable deliberation. The chips on the ground dwindled fast—they just winked out of existence—but the building itself disappeared much like a sugar toy dissolving in water. It vanished reluctantly. Once the roof had gone, though, the walls thinned and sank down more swiftly. Still, it was a five-minute operation before the cottage had faded almost completely and Hodges saw Fritz leap over the remaining barrier and flee madly away.

"Fritz!" called Hodges sharply. "Stop!"

Fritz ran on for three paces, and then

swung around. His mouth dropped open as he saw Hodges. Hodges had released him from the dungeon of Katrina's unsubstantial prison, and it seemed he had released him from this, too.

"I will show you," said Hodges to the wizard, "how I secure servants." To Fritz he called, "Come here!"

Fritz approached, trembling. Hodges said coldly:

"Your name is Fritz. You are my servant. From now on you will remember that you came from a strange land with me. You do not know this land at all. You will stay with me and serve me. You will obey me. You will never tell anyone any of my secrets, and you only wish to stay where I am and do as I bid you."

Fritz's mouth closed, and opened, and stayed open. Hodges winked significantly at him. Fritz shivered, and glanced at the man in the velvet suit. Then he stammered:

"J-ja, Meinherr."

"Follow," commanded Hodges, "with my other servant whose name is Anna."

IX

H E STROLLED on grandly. The wizard Gebhardt looked at once excessively envious and badly worried. Hodges said:

"As a professional courtesy, I will show you how to fascinate your servants in the same way. It lasts for six months. Then you have to repeat the operation. But ordinary folk make excellent servants when they are treated in this way."

He had begun to dislike this Gebhardt, who trapped servants as if they were vermin. The wizard said uncomfortably:

"Indeed, I need servants. I have to lock my sentries in trees, with guns to shoot off if anyone approaches. I can trust them to give alarms only because they would be unable to get out of their trees if anything happened to me. But

it is extremely inconvenient to have to change my guard-posts every few days. If I leave them on guard any longer, even with food, they die."

Hodges scalp crawled. A sick rage began to form deep down inside him.

They strolled onward, and now the tall and slender castle spires rose before them. They climbed toward it, and came to the bramble forest. It was extraordinarily like a neat hedge, but of vast proportions. From the ground to a height of perhaps forty feet, every branch, every bough, every twig and even every leaf was fiendishly barked with needle-sharp prickles. Some were only an inch long, but they would be almost impossible to pull out once they had entered flesh. Others were of every possible size, up to yards. And the thickness of the hedge was such that the eye could not penetrate more than four or five feet into the brambles.

"I have to depend on this," said Gebhardt, complainingly, "because I cannot trust guards or servants. It is a good protection, to be sure. It is even set with traps, so that if anyone tried to cross its top with protective armor, he would be dropped into a pit he could never get out of. But it would be so pleasant to have servants who did not hate me! I could clothe them splendidly and have guard-troops and maids-in-waiting and live in a really gracious fashion! Is that possible, with your powers?"

"Definitely," said Hodges, and burned inside. Then he noticed the immobility of the bramble-forest. There was sand about its base, as far as the eye could follow it. Footprints would show there instantly. Hodges said, "An excellent if crude device!"

"The brambles are green-painted iron," said Gebhardt. "All hermetic, of course. It cannot be chopped through."

They were very near the border of the bramble barrier. Gebhardt drew out his four-sided pyramidal brass bottle. He pressed on the stopper and blew on the wetted side.

A hole opened in the brambles, like a tunnel. It was ten feet high and just as wide, with a regularly arched top. It cut neatly through the ghastly barrier of the iron brambles, was deeply shadowed, and was quite a quarter-mile in length.

They entered, and Gebhardt took a broom from a place just within the tunnel's beginning. He swept away the footprints they had made in crossing the layer of sand.

"Just," he said apologetically, "so no one can possibly know where the entrance is."

They walked through the tunnel in the impossibly barbed forest. The menace of the savagely designed brambles was almost overwhelming. Anna breathed quickly as she followed Hodges. Fritz stumbled, his face gray. He'd understood his instructions from Hodges, given in the guise of orders to an enchanted person. But Fritz had had enough of trying to act by himself. He was now filled with the passionate longing of a proper German to be absolutely under the command of somebody wiser and stronger than himself.

They came out of the forest and the castle stood before them. Gebhardt again pressed on the stopper of his brass bottle and blew on the liquid that appeared, while looking at the tunnel through which they had passed. The tunnel closed immediately.

Hodges hardly noticed. He was staring at the castle itself.

Nearby, it was infinitely more romantic than from a distance. The cleared space about it was not lawn, to be sure. Grass grew wildly, knee-high. But the effect was magnificent. The castle was heavily decorated in a florid Teutonic manner. Sheer lavishness of size and ornamentation would have been impressive, but there was something else.

The castle appeared to be inhabited, but nobody moved. A gardener raked leaves in the uncut grass, but he was motionless. Saddle-horses waited before a small sallyport, their reins in the

hands of a groom, but neither groom nor horses flicked so much as an eyelid. There were armed men standing in the great doorway, and they too were as immobile as if made of stone.

All these figures were brilliantly colored, in costumes of lavish pseudo-material. Hodges had a momentary feeling that he looked at a luridly tinted picture. Then it seemed as if these figures were waxen ones from shop windows. He thought for an instant of the painted statues of the ancient Greeks, which seemed alive to those who gazed at them. But then he realized what this castle most resembled.

HE GUESSED, but with conviction, that this was like the castle of the fairy-story of the Sleeping Beauty. Somewhere within these splendid, towering walls, a young princess might sleep, while all about her the life of a royal palace lay frozen—cooks forever seeming to stir their pots, horses in the stable arrested in the act of whisking away flies with their tails, maid-servants poised forever in the act of using a duster, manservants forever polishing floors. All the life of a bustling royal palace made motionless and still. Hodges guessed that this was really the palace of the Sleeping Beauty.

He was right.

It was a work of art; there was no question about it. But there were aspects which filled Hodges with a shuddering rage until abruptly it was not rage any longer, but a decision as cold-blooded as any that Gebhardt himself could have made. The wizard showed Hodges his servants. He had trapped them exactly as he might have trapped birds or rabbits, and he used them exactly as he might have used dogs or horses.

Hodges saw the slave pit where half-mad creatures who had once been men and women waited his commands. He showed Hodges the ingenious devices by which he separated those he desired to use—exactly on the principle of pen-

ning animals—and conveyed them to where they were to do their labor. Hodges saw two of them at work. They were chopping wood. They were fettered with heavy, hermetic chains. If they did not chop the proper amount, they would be punished horribly. If they did, they would be returned carefully to the slave pit where they would wait until Gebhardt needed their muscles again.

Gebhardt complained that they died so frequently that he was constantly wasting time trapping new ones. Meanwhile, he could not risk using any of them for personal service, since none of them desired anything more passionately than to tear him limb from limb. So the master of this castle had to make his own bed, and cook his own food, and live alone in a palace more magnificent than that of any emperor. He was, he said, very lonely.

"And," he added apologetically, "I cannot offer those little niceties of hospitality I would wish to offer a guest like yourself."

Hodges grinned at him. It was not a pleasant grin, but Gebhardt did not seem to recognize the menace in it.

"Concerning the servant problem," Hodges said smoothly, "I think I will be able to end that for you."

Then he let himself be led on an exploration of the castle. It was not wise to insist on wizard's shop-talk in haste, though he meant to learn much before he took measures to end what he had seen in the slave pen. But on the journey—with Gebhardt talking proudly, showing off what he had contrived—he discovered with incredulous astonishment that Gebhardt was actually an artist in the improbable medium he worked with.

Katrina and Else, as witches, had formed their dwelling to impress their customers. They gloated over the horror of their dwelling and its effect upon those who came to do business with them. But they craved money, real money. So they sold hermetic bodies to

aging women and performed less savory services for customers with other desires. The wizard Gebhardt, however, had no such apparent craving for actual riches.

Hodges hypocritically complimented him upon his lack of avarice.

"What does it profit a man," he asked ironically, "to place his art at the disposal of the ignorant? You use our art as it is used by the greatest magicians everywhere, to live beautifully and graciously. Your art is your servant, not the hireling of vulgar patrons. That is as it should be!"

Gebhardt was flattered. He wore a worried look, but he showed Hodges the great ballroom in which there had never been a ball. But it had walls of mirrors, which in a backward nation would be valued much more highly than masterpieces of art. There was an effect of almost limitless space.

"This is true art," said Hodges, with the same intent to flatter and disarm his host. "You use the precious not for ostentation, but to secure effects the less-than-precious will not secure. Your use of opal flooring in your study, for example—"

He followed Gebhardt into a state dining room, where hermetic-gold plate packed an elaborate carved sideboard fully forty feet in length. The dining table was longer yet, and set with places for a banquet that would never be served. There were figures of footmen behind each place, and Hodges gravely complimented the wizard upon them, too.

"This is a masterpiece!" he said. "I have seen wizards, even in my own country, use figures identical to each other for such a composition as this. Here, every one is different. Those two might be brothers, but this handsome figure is plainly of another lineage. Really Gebhardt, I have never seen such taste and brilliance!"

But he was filled with a savage curiosity to know why a man would live solitary in such grandeur, in a castle filled with lifeless figures, pretending

pleasure in loneliness.

The man in the shabby velvet suit looked abashed but gratified. He led the way here, and he led the way there, and it seemed to Hodges that he was in the company of a lunatic. Because this castle was all illusion, yet Gebhardt had planned each room with fanatic care, and contrived its furniture—all illusion—with artistic nicety, and composed tableaux of images so that one constantly had the sensation that they must presently complete the gestures they were making, and must finish what they were saying to each other, and must go about the business so painstakingly implied everywhere.

The castle seemed haunted, but it was all illusion. Gebhardt had filled scores of apartments with dreams which Hodges—with Anna and Fritz close behind him—were the only others ever to see.

Hodges followed and admired everything, and if one could avoid a feeling of cold chills down one's back, everything was admirable. There were draperies. There were desks. Musicians tuned their instruments for a concert that would never be played. At another place, the figure of a fat man plucked at another figure's sleeve and with glistening eyes was plainly in the act of telling some joke, whose point would never be reached. A maid-servant with a tray was carefully pushing open a door to deliver the burden which no one would ever receive. A bored footman stifled a yawn, which would never either be stifled or completed.

It was incredible. It was astounding that anyone, with any possible medium of expression, could have done so meticulous and unjustified a masterpiece of contriving. But it was all illusion. It was all without meaning. Hodges followed, and truly admired, while rage beat underneath his praises, and a certain astonished horror came into his mind at the desire of any man to perform so futile an undertaking, at such cost in anguish and slavery to others.

X

THE PEAK of his revulsion, however, came when Gebhardt—by that time flutteringly proud—took him to a room high in one of the towers. He was all artist-technician now, and voluble about his problems and his triumphs.

"You see," he said zestfully in the hall outside this special room, "I contrived a legend, and this castle is the realization of it all. I have made an art-work of a story of my own invention, and it is realized about you. I made a story of a princess doomed to sleep through centuries until a prince should come and kiss her on the lips. And this is the palace in which she waits. Rather charming, *hein?*"

Hodges looked at him enigmatically. "Everything blends into the story," said Gebhardt with naive pride. "Everything! The bramble hedge is the means by which none but the true prince may ever approach the castle. The motionless figures are the servitors and the court, frozen in mid-gesture to wait until the prince shall come. I have devoted all my time to this composition! Modestly, I consider that it is unsurpassed as an accomplishment."

"It is both unique," said Hodges, "and unsurpassable."

"And here," said Gebhardt, beaming, "is the room where the princess of the legend awaits her prince! I almost regret that the legend is but an invention! Enter!"

He led the way into the room. It was the bedroom of a young princess—charming, innocently gay, girlishly extravagant. And there was a battered doll, put away but just barely visible in case a young princess wished to remind herself of her recent childhood; and there were cosmetics on a dressing-table, and lovely combs to put in her hair. . . .

And lying on the bed, as if she had fallen asleep while day-dreaming deliciously of wonderful things to come,

there was the figure of a young girl.

Hermetic material, Hodges reminded himself, took on the color, texture and tint it was desired to take. But it was horrible to think of such beauty as this girl presented contrived by a man like the wizard.

"I modeled her," said Gebhardt complacently, "after the Graf of Goslar's wife. I had her as my captive for a while. I do not care for real wealth," he added almost apologetically, "but one must take thought for the future. So I carried her off and held her for ransom. Thereafter I had a nest-egg in case I should ever require to travel as a nobleman through foreign lands, and to establish myself elsewhere."

Hodges said nothing. He looked at the figure of the girl. He remembered that Anna had told him of this captivity, and of the Graf who had beggared himself to ransom his lovely wife. And he also remembered that this man had then stolen the Graf's daughter to be a hostage for the future, and that the woman who was the model for this sleeping figure had died of grief because of it.

Then Hodges wondered grimly what had become of the child. The most logical guess would be that she had become Gebhardt's servant. In which case she would have been put into the slave pit with the half-mad creatures he kept for workmen and sentries and woodchoppers. She would have been dead these many years.

"I greatly admire you," said Hodges in a flat voice.

They went, then, to the wizard's laboratory. It should have been underground, but the castle had not been built on dug-out foundations, but of dreams.

"I shall be pleased," said Hodges, "to see the techniques by which you have accomplished so wonderful a result. Then, if I may, I will give you any of mine which may be new to you."

Gebhardt beamed. At the door of his laboratory, though, he looked significantly at Anna and Fritz.

"You will wait outside this door,"

said Hodges. "You will not go away under any circumstances."

Fritz looked panicky at the idea of having even a thickness of wood between him and Hodges. Anna firmly took his arm. The door closed. The laboratory was a simple work-room in which there were traces of conceptions being worked on in pseudo-matter for later placing above.

Hodges lighted a cigarette. Gebhardt quivered. But Hodges had done it deliberately. His first action after demolishing the successive traps on the hillside had been to light a cigarette. Gebhardt should interpret it as some preparation to counter any other hermetic device whatsoever.

THE MAN in the velvet suit said, still glowing from the praise he had craved so long and only now had received:

"You are, of course, aware of our process for making hermetic things?"

"I was much interested in your servant trap and brambles," said Hodges. "It is not our method, but it seems effective to some degree. In the hands of an artist—" he waved his hands around, indicating the castle—"it is superb! I think it was used in my own country some hundreds of years ago. If you would explain fully?"

He blew twin jets of smoke through his nose. Gebhardt began to sweat. Then he produced his pyramidal brass bottle.

"The elixir is contained in this bottle. One presses the top, a little of the elixir is forced out, and one breathes on it while looking at the place and thinking of the desired object. And it becomes."

Hodges held out his hand. Anna had said something like this, but he had rejected the idea that the mere evaporation of any fluid could provide the energy necessary to create a force-field of any considerable energy content. Knowing what would be the order of energy of the force-fields, he had been forced to struggle with the apparent impossi-

bility. Now, having seen the fact, he made a sudden guess.

The elixir did not have a base of water. So it might be a hydrocarbon solution of two substances which, not being ionized in solution, would not interact. But they might interact as free substances in the absence of the solvent, when it dried. Or it could be a single solute which, when exposed to the oxygen of air, produced enormous energy. Phosphoric iron, or finely divided nickel or cobalt—and certainly uranium!—suspended in a hydrocarbon which had no oxygen in its composition, would remain inert until the liquid evaporated, and then combine with the air as it reached them.

Iron, in such a case, would actually give off more energy than the same weight of thermit, thought at a lower temperature.

Hodges took the brass bottle in his hand. He said tolerantly:

"Most amusing!" He pointed to his own wrist-watch. "I use this little device, which appears to be a miniature clock to tell the time. It actually does tell the time, but also it produces hermetic objects when I wish them. This use of an elixir is quaint!"

Hodges had the air of one who is deeply amused. He pressed the top of the stopper. An infinitely fine jet of liquid flowed out. It settled on the metal. Hodges blew on it, looking at the floor.

A wrist-watch apparently identical to his own appeared where he looked. It was complete with strap and hands, but Hodges suspected it would not run. He didn't know enough about the works of a watch to imagine functioning inside for it.

"Here is a gift," Hodges said. "I will show you how to use it. It is itself hermetic, yet it will make hermetic things. Unfortunately, it creates fields of force so powerful that it would not be safe to use near hermetic objects made merely by an elixir. It might destroy them. May I keep this quaint bottle as a souvenir?"

Gebhardt gulped and bowed. He immediately went to a shelf and supplied himself with an additional bottle. It was understandable that a wizard would not want to be deprived of his magic, and would keep refills at hand.

Hodges pressed the stopper again. He blew. There was an experiment he wanted to try. It had been in the back of his mind ever since he learned what hermetic matter was—forcefields like those of matter, but minus molecules and atoms.

He blew on the fluid. He thought concentratedly. If nothing happened, he would say tolerantly that elixir was not as powerful as the quite imaginary methods he pretended to know. If something did happen, it should put Gebhardt in his place.

Something happened. A glittering silvery ball appeared atop the floor. Hodges waited. The silvery ball floated upward, reached the ceiling and bounced against it.

"In my country," said Hodges, "we travel in hermetic vehicles which fly in the air like birds. Like that. I will make a dirigible for you."

The word would be meaningless to Gebhardt. But Hodges was himself amazed. He had reasoned that in theory if hermetic things could have the "physical" properties of actual matter, at the choice of their maker, it should be possible to make them with the physical properties of substances that did not actually exist. One needed only to know something about interatomic and intermolecular bonds and force-fields. So Hodges had made a metal which was lighter than air. It was a balloon.

It was not anything that Gebhardt could not do. It was something he could not think of doing. Hodges had information about such matters as the possibility of balloons which Gebhardt simply did not have.

There came a dull booming sound, outside the castle. A wailing cry followed it. Gebhardt started. Agitation appeared on his features.

"One of my sentries has fired an alarm," he said excitedly. "Someone approaches the bramble forest. I must go and see!"

He got up and plainly waited for Hodges to go before him out of the laboratory. He would not leave anybody here, not even a guest wizard. Hodges suspected why. He would have liked very much to remain and do a little shop-lifting, but he went out. Fritz looked as if about to swoon with relief at sight of him.

They followed Gebhardt along the silent halls of the castle.

"You will pardon me," said the wizard apologetically. "I must find out what has happened."

HE HURRIED away. Hodges said swiftly to his two followers:

"He thinks I'm a greater wizard than he is." He turned to Anna. "You told me about an elixir. Did Katrina and Else have brass bottles like this that held the elixir?"

Anna shook her head.

"Not like that. They had crystal bottles. They poured something out of them when they wished to make hermetic things."

"I only hope they smashed," said Hodges grimly, "when the house and prison vanished. Did they have tanks of elixir?"

Anna said thoughtfully, "They had a great pottery bottle. It would hold much. They were always terribly afraid it would be tipped and broken."

"With luck," said Hodges, "that big pot broke when the house disappeared."

He waited on the great stone steps of Castle Unconquerable. He was uneasy, he was disturbed, he looked uncomfortably all around him. He looked suddenly at Anna.

"Anna," he said abruptly, "how old are you?"

"I cannot tell you," said Anna mildly. "Why?"

"I have a hunch," said Hodges. "You never change color. When you are

frightened you do not turn pale. You have freckles, and they are not distributed at random. Anna, is your appearance as false as Katrina's and Else's was?"

Anna licked her lips.

"I—I think so," she said faintly. "But I am not sure."

Hodges nodded grimly.

"I'm getting a hunch," Hodges repeated. "It's a strong hunch. I'm not sure I like it, but—"

There was movement at the edge of the bramble forest. Gebhardt came out of a very small tunnel at its base. Behind him came two other figures. One was glamorously blonde. The other was even more glamorously brunette.

One wore a gown of pink cloudy stuff, and a golden coronet from which vast masses of blonde hair flowed down to her waist and beyond—Katrina. The other was clad in blue filmy stuff, with an identical coronet. Her hair was black, with little sparkling lights in it—Else. But their costumes were not exactly what they had been. They had not exactly the feminine touch. Hodges noted the fact with a sense of shock as he realized its implications.

Standing still, they looked like utterly desirable young girls in the attire of royal princesses. But they did not look exactly as they had looked before. They really looked like a man's memory of them from an earlier encounter, slightly modified by the shock of seeing them as decrepit, filthy, rag-clothed crones. Even now, they hobbled; they moved with the shuffling, limping, exhausted gait of old women taxed beyond their strength.

Hodges knew, instinctively, that they had been forced to travel three leagues on foot when their house and their containers of elixir had vanished and been broken. All their power for evil and self-defense had been taken from them. But at the sight of Hodges, malevolence flowed from them as if it were radiation that could be felt.

"I think," said Hodges, "that this is it. Get down to solid ground, quick!"

He led the way down the stairs, to the knee-high grass. He put his hand on his radio, and waited.

For dramatic effect, for its psychological influence, he put a cigarette in his mouth and lighted it.

The ancient, evil eyes in the two young faces glared at him as Katrina and her sister came forward. Gebhardt looked utterly enraged, and thoroughly scared.

"I think," said Hodges in a peculiar calm, "that you have made them rather more attractive than they made themselves, Gebhardt."

Gebhardt wrung his hands. He was frightened. He knew, now, that Hodges had deceived him, that Hodges had been a prisoner of the two witches, who had come panting and desperate to him for help.

Hodges could guess what claim they had upon him. He could guess the frenzy that possessed all three of them now.

The blonde witch raised her hand to her face. Hodges turned the knob on the radio set. Katrina would be blowing on a trace of elixir from Gebhardt's brass bottle. They would all three be armed with a little of it, because three witches were better than one.

But Hodges turned on the radio set. At least, he turned the knob. But the knob came off in his fingers.

Quicksand gripped his knees. It clung. Anna cried out. Fritz shrieked. It rose quickly—to their thighs, to their waists.

Hodges blew swiftly on the brass bottle. He was never quite able to remember how he had gotten it out so quickly. He was never able to remember just how he performed the superlatively sensible feat of thinking of a protective bank-vault, to be around Anna, Fritz and himself.

They were in complete darkness. On the inside of an armored bank-vault there would be no light except that supplied by electricity. But hermetic matter was force-fields, only. Force-fields, as such, are not conductors of electricity.

There were, moreover, no dynamos to supply current. There could be no light at all within the vault.

But also, no additional force-fields could interpenetrate the force-fields of the hermetic steel shell that sealed in Hodges and his two followers. The quicksand ceased to rise. They were waist deep in it, but no more. There was a dead silence, a hushed silence.

"Steady!" said Hodges. "It takes time for them to unmake hermetic stuff. They'll have to work on this. Wait a minute, now!"

He struck his lighter, and a small flame came into the darkness. Hodges inspected his radio by it. He fumbled in his pocket.

Anna spoke unsteadily. "Maybe," she said quietly, "they will not try to break in. Maybe they will pile a mountain upon whatever you made to protect us. Maybe they will make a wall around us, deep and high, and fill it with water, so that if we escape from this—if we make a hole to get out—the water will rush in and drown us."

Hodges had to put out his lighter to do what was necessary. In the darkness, his voice rolled cavernously.

"Something like that is reasonable," he acknowledged. "Or we could suffocate for lack of air."

He worked by feel. The clammy quicksand was horrifying. He stopped work long enough to blow upon the brass bottle, after pressing its stopper. The quicksand began to descend, as if it were evaporating very slowly.

"Anna," he said evenly, "I have an idea. There is friendship between Gebhardt and the two witches. Gebhardt is a very intelligent man, in his way. He thinks of everything, even to the point of getting himself a nest-egg that he does not plan to use."

XI

FRITZ whimpered. Hodges went on, undisturbed.

"He stole the Graf's wife and held her

for ransom. When the Graf invited witches and wizards to help him obtain revenge, and they turned on him, he had to apply to Gebhardt, his fiercest enemy, for help. And Gebhardt gave it, but he made sure the Graf would never dare attack him again. He stole the Graf's small daughter."

Anna agreed unhappily in the blackness, while Hodges worked to get a small pocket-knife open with one hand. He held the radio with the other.

"That is true," Anna said, "but I do not see—"

"It makes sense!" Hodges said. "Somebody gave you to Katrina and Else, to raise as their servant. They made sure that nobody harmed you, but it was not kindness on their part! It was orders from Gebhardt, who originally captured you. It would be very wise of Gebhardt not to have the Graf's small daughter in his own palace. Suppose some alchemist, or some daring young prince, dared to challenge Gebhardt and even to conquer him! Gebhardt could not be killed before he had revealed the hiding place of the Graf's daughter. He could pay her as a ransom for himself! You see?"

Anna gasped. "You mean that I am—"

"I'm not sure," said Hodges. "But I think I can become sure."

"It—does not matter," said Anna faintly. "Not now!"

"At this moment, no," Hodges acknowledged. "But remember it. I'm about ready to move—to destroy the hermetic matter about us. I think the castle will vanish too. I believe the bramble forest will disappear. And—" he was definitely grim—"I think that Gebhardt's servants are going to be freed. That's why I didn't simply turn this knob with my teeth. Stay close to me. understand?"

There was a little stirring. Anna touched him.

"V-very close," she said shakily. "I will!"

Hodges twisted his pen-knife. The

knob of the radio set normally fitted on a small bronze shaft. The end of the shaft was split, so that it tended to expand. The knob needed only to be pushed into place and it would hold fast by friction. But the knob had vanished. So Hodges had the small blade of his pen-knife in that slot. By it, he could turn the radio on and off.

He turned it on.

There was a shivering, and a roaring sound. A great gust of wind struck them. Even as he staggered from its violence, Hodges realized—and was annoyed that he had not thought of it before—that a force-field simulating matter would naturally push air out of the way. There had been much pseudo-matter piled upon the vault he had improvised. When it all vanished, there was a great emptiness into which air rushed. The noise was like a clap of thunder.

And then Hodges and Anna and Fritz stood again in the sunshine. A little distance away Gebhardt stood gasping, with two figures beside him whose brightly-colored clothing was disappearing swiftly, along with golden coronets and masses of lovely hair. Their young faces and lissome forms evaporated horribly and swiftly, so that through them came into view the malignant, screeching, and wrinkled faces of two ancient and horrible women.

Behind them the Castle Unconquerable began swiftly to obliterate itself. Its towers turned to smoke; tilted and crashed and vanished. Its great walls showed ragged gaps, which spread as if some incredibly swift-acting cancer were at work upon them. The halls, the domes, the sally-ports, the brightly-clad images which had seemed so alive—

In the distance there arose a shrill, screaming cry which was exultant past all belief, and menacing beyond the power of anybody to imagine.

"Come on," said Hodges very steadily.

He turned his head away from the empty space where the castle had stood. He walked across the clearing where a

bramble forest had been. He moved toward the woods.

He heard screeches. From the forest beyond that clearing came rag-clad, brutalized, half-mad men. They were the sentries who had been posted in hollow trees from which they could not escape. If anything happened to Gebhardt, they would starve helplessly. That was the theory. Now something had happened to his powers and defenses, and they moved slaving toward him to make sure they would never be imprisoned again.

But two of them saw Hodges. They howled and came toward him.

Hodges turned off the radio set and stilled its oscillations. He blew thoughtfully on the side of the pyramidal brass bottle. Boxing gloves appeared, in swift and hurtling motion. They struck. The two men went down.

Hodges turned on the set again and the gloves vanished. He did not pause to congratulate himself on his clarity of thinking. The local witches and wizards had no clear notions of kinetic energy. They had no notions of machines, but only of tools. Since they could only make pseudo-material objects, it had never occurred to them to make those objects in motion. It was a quaint oversight.

There came a wave of barely-human creatures who were the servants that the wizard had trapped like vermin and kept in the slave pit. Screaming with joy and blood-lust they swarmed toward Gebhardt. Hodges saw him with something that glinted brass. He blew and blew and blew on it, desperately. The two witches, hobbling, fled with screams.

"I couldn't save them," said Hodges coldly, "without letting them have the power to make hermetic stuff again. And they'd try to kill us."

HE TURNED away. Presently, Fritz said shrilly:

"They—they are coming after *us*!"

Hodges thoughtfully turned off the radio and blew upon the brass bottle.

There was a fence. There was an impact as the crazed victims of Gebhardt hit it.

Hodges blew again.

Within the fence there appeared a great silvery globe. It was exactly like the smaller globe that Hodges had made in the wizard's laboratory. But this one had a net over it, and the net went down to a wickerwork car. It started to rise, and Hodges thought of bags of ballast. It settled to the ground again, but it leaned and strained toward the northwest.

"We want," said Hodges, "to get some idea of how to get back where we belong, Fritz. We'll take a ride in this balloon and get away from the poor devils outside the fence. We'll get a good birds-eye view of the terrain, and maybe we can spot a town."

Fritz and Anna climbed in, eagerly. Hodges joined them. He unknotted a sack of ballast and the balloon rose.

Hodges stared down as the earth fell away, and shriekings of rage came from the purely primitive creatures who had been reduced below the status of human beings by Gebhardt. Gebhardt was merely a bloody smear on the ground where his Castle Unconquerable had been. Katrina and Else were—It was not good to think about what they looked like now.

Hodges thought, and blew on the side of the brass bottle. It was difficult to keep his mind on something he wanted to take form, because the problem of how so small a quantity of liquid could contain so much energy was tantalizing. But he did manage it. He heard Anna exclaim behind him, and he wondered how she had changed.

"Put on the clothes," said Hodges drily, "and then if you don't mind, I'd like to take a look at you."

He heard Anna give a soft cry of relief. He stared out over the rolling ground which descended gradually below the balloon. He saw the town of Goslar, far away. But it seemed to flow closer—though to grow smaller—as the

balloon's ascent continued.

One part of his mind was looking for signs of civilization as he knew it—of modern Germany, with autobahns and radios and electric lights and a very deep regret that it had lost World War II. He had been in that modern Germany only twenty-four hours ago—thirty, at most. He had traveled on foot, and as a captive in a squeaking two-wheeled cart, not more than two dozen miles.

He could see two dozen miles now, and he saw no sign of the neat checker-board fields and the macadamized roads and the dense population he remembered. Yet he couldn't be more than two dozen miles from such things.

There was, vaguely, obscurely, uncertainly, some thought in his mind that the flow of time was not a single stream. There had been speculation that—just as there were dozens of possible tomorrows—there could be dozens of possible todays. Time could move in parallel tracks, and it was conceivable that a man could shift by unguessable means from one to another of them and find all history different, but equally true, in the second.

It was not a theory he had paid much attention to. It was not a part of normal physics to assume anything of that sort. The idea was beyond physics. It was metaphysics, but it was possible. It might be what had happened here.

The earth began to move more swiftly below the balloon, as if the globe had risen into a faster current of air. The ground flowed to the east, and there were clouds not very much higher, now.

Anna said gladly, "You may turn, if you wish!"

Hodges turned in the wicker basket of the balloon. And Anna smiled at him. She wore, now, an outfit of white dungarees—not well-fitting, but vastly more becoming than her old smock. Hodges looked at her, and said:

"You look like your mother, Anna."

And she did. The hermetic princess in the tower of Gebhardt's castle, who

had been made in the likeness of the Graf von Goslar's wife, had been an excellent likeness of Anna.

"I suppose," said Hodges grimly, "I'll have to try to get you to your father."

Anna shook her head. She was very lovely indeed. It had been Hodge's previous opinion that only brunettes were really pleasing to the eye. But Anna was young and eager and very happy indeed to see the expression on his face and in his eyes, and he could not find any flaw in her whatsoever.

"No," said Anna. "He has dreamed of me, perhaps, but he does not know me or love me. Not really. But you know me! You—liked me even when I was—different."

Hodges wavered. Then he shook his head. The Goslar she knew was not a civilized place. Its inhabitants were ignorant and unwashed, their ideas of sanitation were incredible, and their social system was feudal in the very worst sense of the word. But Anna was the daughter of the Graf von Goslar, and his only child. If there was anyone who would have reason to be happy in such a monstrous medieval world, it should be Anna. She would be a princess living in a castle, with guards and musicians to protect and amuse her, and an alchemist to make whatever pretty things she might desire.

She would be very much better off there than in a mass-produced suburban house, married to a newly-graduated Ph. D. who had only the choice of whether he should devote his life to catering to the advertising department of an oil company or that of a manufacturer of cigarettes.

Fritz said anxiously, "Clouds! We go into them!"

The silvery, net-covered globe rose into dense, clammy, fleecy white stuff. Hodges hauled out the brass bottle. He pressed the stopper and blew on the side.

The ground was blotted out below. All about them was fog, dense mist that almost obscured the figures in the wicker basket from each other. Hodges felt

dizzy. He blew, and thought fixedly of bags of ballast. There were bags of ballast.

XII

THE BALLOON descended into clear air. Then Hodges' heart stood still. Below them were parts of the Hartz Mountains. But there were highways, hamlets, neatly-divided fields cultivated in a fashion unknown a few moments ago. There was a railroad. Hodges saw a train puffing along, its locomotive whistling shrilly.

Hodges gasped, and created masses of bags of ballast. The balloon descended swiftly. They went down and down and down.

"Cast loose some bags!" snapped Hodges, and followed his own order.

The balloon continued to descend, but it slowed down. It finally reached the ground, bounced once, and settled firmly.

Fritz leaped, out babbling with joy. He held fast to the basket. Hodges lifted Anna out. She clung to him just a little, watching his face and not even glancing at the landscape around her. He climbed out. The balloon remained grounded. Hodges conjured into existence enough ballast to keep it from rising again.

"I have a feeling," said Hodges, "that we were noticed coming down. I don't want to try to tell anybody where I've been or what happened there! Let's move!"

The balloon had descended close to the edge of a well-trimmed bit of woodland, in a rolling pasture. Hodges led the way along the woodland's edge.

Birds sang, the sun shone, from far away came the dismal hoot of a train.

Then there was a closer sound. A motorcycle pop-pop-popped along a highway not far away. Hodges swerved into the edge of the wood. He looked back at the balloon.

Suddenly it was not. The ignition system of a motorcycle creates electromagnetic oscillations. They are inevi-

table, where there are sparks. They are even, after a fashion, tuned to an approximate wave-length.

The motorcycle came along the highway. Perhaps its rider had seen the balloon descend; perhaps not. But he saw no balloon now. He went on. His motorcycle had proved conclusively to Hodges that Anna could not go into a modern hamlet of modern Germany, where electrical appliances were commonplace, while wearing dungarees which might vanish like the balloon when electromagnetic oscillations impinged upon them.

Hodges turned. He found himself grinning idiotically.

"Anna," he said with entirely false ruefulness, "I thought I should return you to your father. Now I can't. We have come back to the world I know. And I don't know how to get back to yours."

Anna said nothing. She looked at him with very bright eyes. Hodges marveled. She was absolutely the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

"I'm afraid," said Hodges happily, "that nobody else would believe anything about you, and you certainly aren't equipped to live in the sort of world we have. So I—well—I'll have to take care of you."

Anna said nothing, but she smiled at him.

"And there are conventions about such things," added Hodges. "Will you mind marrying me?"

"Not at all," said Anna tranquilly. "I have meant to, ever since I saw you in the dungeon."

Hodges hunted in his pockets. He had a certain amount of money—enough to last him for two weeks on a walking tour of Germany and then pay his fare back to the United States. But he brought out the double-handful of coins he had taken from a brigand on the hillside above the burning inn. There were eleven gold pieces—fat gold pieces.

"Fritz," said Hodges authoritatively. "I'm giving you this money. Occupation

money. You will go to the nearest town and buy some clothes for Anna. You will bring them back here. Then I will split these gold pieces with you. I won't take her to a town wearing hermetic clothes! There might be automobiles!"

Fritz, grinning from ear to ear, took the paper money Hodges gave him. He trudged away. He would come back, because he would be paid for it. Moreover, even young black-marketeers have some sense of obligation to people who have kept them from being married to witches, and broken on the wheel, and popped into slave pens.

"What?" asked Anna interestedly, "is automobiles?"

"You'll find out later," Hodges assured her. "Along with marriage-licenses and suburban living and tele-

vision and lawnmowers. But we have some time to wait. Let's not talk about things like that just now."

"What do you want to do?" asked Anna.

He kissed her. She kissed back. . . .

Fritz returned in two hours with parcels. The clothes he brought were not pretty, but his intentions had been good. He told them where they were. They were roughly a dozen miles northeast of Goslar, and there were trains and American troops and civilization only four miles away.

He looked at Hodges and Anna sitting side by side on a log, listening to him.

When he had finished his report, Anna said:

"Why did you hurry so?"

SCIENTIFIC INSTRUMENTS

LISTED below in jumbled fashion are the names of 10 scientific instruments, together with a brief description and /or function of each. Can you match up at least 7 of them correctly for a passing score? 8-9 is good; 10 excellent.

- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| 1. ERGOMETER | (a) used for taking photographs of the sun. |
| 2. BRONTOGRAPH | (b) one used for measuring specific gravity and weight. |
| 3. SONOMETER | (c) an instrument for the measurement of mental exertion or fatigue. |
| 4. PLUVIOMETER | (d) used for determining the color of a substance. |
| 5. ASTROPHOTOMETER | (e) an angle measuring instrument. |
| 6. GRAVIMETER | (f) an instrument for detecting moisture (especially) in the air. |
| 7. GONIMETER | (g) one that records the occurrence of thunder. |
| 8. HELIOGRAPH | (h) an instrument for determining the brightness of stars. |
| 9. HYDROSCOPE | (i) a sound-measuring instrument. |
| 10. CHROMOMETER | (j) used for measuring the depth of rainfall. |

*Here is the tale of a grave situation,
where levity follows upon levitation!*



Illustration by ALEX
SCHOMBURG

No Place for Housekeeping

By JACK LEWIS

A LONGSIDE the lock door of the pillbox blister nestled against the south ringwall of Clavius, Sam Tuttle eased the decrepit tractor to a jerky halt in a heap of slate-grey moondust.

From one of the circular ports, a boy's face peered out at him. Elvera was nowhere to be seen—which was

to be expected. He entered the lock, and when the green light shone, kicked off the heavy space-jumper and went inside.

"Hi, Pop," the boy said.

Sam patted the lad on the shoulder, conscious of the milky-paleness seeping through the young cheeks. "You've been forgetting to use the sun lamp again, son," he said.

The boy searched his face. "You took it in the workshop Pop. Remember, you were working on some kind of gadget."

Sam Tuttle turned away. At the far end of the room, by the wall which partitioned off the work shop, a woman was pretending to busy herself over an electric stove. "I'm home dear," he said.

The woman looked up but did not answer. She was young—probably in her late twenties—but her comparative youth was distorted by her straight black hair and the creases of worry around her eyes and mouth.

"Any luck Pop?" the boy asked.

Sam shook his head. "No Raymond—no luck." He turned to his wife again. "Elvera," he said. "I wish you wouldn't look at me that way. It's not my fault that everything here's sucked dry."

Elvera adjusted the strap of her apron. "It's not my fault either," she said wearily.

"Elvera, we've been through all this before!"

"Sure we've been through it," Elvera said acidly. "A hundred times you've told me that all the metal on the moon that amounts to anything has already been staked out. All right! So we didn't get any of it. Fine . . . so let's go home?"

Sam winced. "We can't do that honey. You know we can't. We don't have enough money yet."

"We had the money," Elvera snapped. "Twice we had the money! And twice you let Doyle Pryor and the rest of those hustlers over at the Tycho Settlement cheat you out of it. Now we own a piece of the moon. That makes me proud—real proud!"

"It wasn't Pryor's fault honey. I bought the land from him in a legitimate

business deal. It wasn't his fault that. . . ."

"That's the trouble with you," Elvera interrupted. "Ever since we've been married you've been a sucker for every get-rich-quick deal that came along. Back on earth it was your gadgets that kept us broke. I thought that was bad. Now you're buying real estate on the moon! Oh Sam—" Elvera's voice suddenly broke off to the exaggerated-patience tone he was so familiar with—"there's nothing here. You admit that. So borrow the fare home. Pryor would lend it to you."

SAM tugged on his long chin. "There's the meteorites," he said. "Only last week Roy Gittens found one on the Mare Nectaris with over six-thousand dollars' worth of boom-dust in it."

"There's meteorites on earth too, Pop," Raymond said suddenly. "I saw one in a museum once."

"Meteorites are different there, son," Sam explained dutifully. "Back on earth, all the valuable metals are burned out before they land. That's why you see all those holes in them."

"Why don't you get your father to find you a shield stone?" Elvera said over her shoulder.

"What's that, Pop?" Raymond asked.

"Don't pay any attention to your mother," Sam said. "She's just being sarcastic."

"But what is it?" the boy repeated.

"There's no such thing, son. It's just an old legend some of the early spacemen started. A shield stone is supposed to be a meteorite made of a substance that counteracts the force of gravity when it's heated. The heat is supposed to rearrange the molecules in some way. There's no such thing as a gravity shield. Probably never will be. It's just a story someone made up."

"Gosh, if there was such a thing it would be worth a lot of money, wouldn't it Pop?"

Sam turned to his wife. "Call me when supper's ready," he said. "I'll be

in the workshop."

The home-made partition where he pursued his hobby was cramped. A wooden table ran the length of the room, and various tools were racked up neatly on the wall. A dozen chunks of rock lay in the center of the floor. Some of them were small meteorites; others, pieces chipped off larger stones. All had one thing in common; they contained no uranium. For five minutes he tried winding an armature on a meteorite analyzer with which he was experimenting. Then, after he snapped the fine wire twice, gave up. Filled with a feeling of complete and utter futility, he sat down at the bench, cupping his chin in the palms of his hands.

Elvera was right. He must have been mad to bring his wife and son a quarter-of-a-million miles from a breath of fresh air while he chipped away at rocks on the moon. The two months he'd intended to stay, had now stretched to seven. And far from bettering his position, he didn't even have fare home. Elvera was right in many ways. Some men—men like Doyle Pryor—managed each month to hack a small fortune out of the dust pits. But for every Pryor, there were ten like him. They were the men who'd always almost-hit-it—almost, but not quite.

He got up; feeling sorry for himself wouldn't get the fare home. Mechanically, he unfastened the money belt strapped about his waist. He didn't have to count it. He knew what was there. Twelve-hundred and fifteen dollars. And fare back to Terra was an even three thousand—an even one thousand dollars a person.

Behind him the partition door slid open. "Come on, eat your supper," Elvera said.

THE meteorite was a new one. It had fallen just alongside a foot-wide crevice in a small craterlet nicknamed the Borne hole. Sam Tuttle slid off the tractor seat, and stomped through the ankle-deep dust toward it. It was about

four feet in diameter, with a projection at one end that looked oddly like a horse's head. When his face-plate began to cloud up he set down the dial counter making the necessary adjustments with both hands. His vision cleared. He picked up the instrument again, squinting at it through the amber glass.

Abruptly he was aware of a tingling sensation that started at a point directly under his oxygen tank and worked up to his helmet liner . . . He was twenty feet from the stone, and already the counter was wavering between forty and fifty. In one long jump he was alongside the rock . . . two hundred, two fifty . . . He laid the counter down on the halo of gray dust surrounding his find. The needle jumped again—stopping this time against the set screw just past the three-hundred mark.

He'd just started back to the tractor for his digging tools, when from the edge of his eye he noticed a flash of movement. It was above him and riding along the rim of the crater—half hidden from view by the pinnacles of rock inside the ringwall. Even as he watched, it disappeared from view behind the inverted icicles of black rock. It was another tractor, a red one—Pryor's of course. Doyle Pryor owned this piece of real estate and everything on it—including meteorites. He'd have to act fast. Apparently he hadn't been seen yet and to be observed examining the stone would be a sure giveaway. In three long strides he covered the hundred feet to the tractor, mounted it, and kicked it into full forward. He was halfway to the base of the crater's edge when the other vehicle lumbered out from behind the row of spires on the ringwall and started down the natural ramp. Simultaneously, a swishing noise sounded inside his helmet, followed by a human voice: "Hello there. That you Tuttle?"

Sam bit his lip. Beads of sweat he couldn't rub off rolled down his forehead and into his eyes. "Yeah, Mr.

Pryor, it's me."

There was a silence on the other end while the red tractor moved down the ramp toward him. Then: "A little out of your territory, aren't you?"

"Been taking a short cut over to the Landau plain," Sam lied. "Saves me a six mile trip around the ringwall."

Pryor's vehicle pulled up alongside and came to a halt. It was a new job—an International—complete with pressurized cabin and seating space for four people. The airlock swung open. Again Sam was aware of the crackling inside his helmet. "Bounce over for a while, Tuttle," Pryor said. "Have a smoke. It'll help take the kinks out of your jumper."

Sam started to refuse, then changed his mind. A cigarette—even one of Doyle Pryor's cigarettes—would taste good now. "Coming!" he said.

Pryor slid out from behind the controls when he entered the other vehicle. He was a big man, with heavy jowls and a bristle of beard as black as the bottom of a dark-side crater. Sam took one of the cigarettes from the pack Pryor pushed at him and lit up.

"Any luck?" Pryor asked.

Sam took a deep drag. "No," he said. "No luck."

"Heard they had a shower here last night. Thought I'd have a look around," Pryor said. "See anything that looked interesting?"

Sam shook his head.

PRYOR looked thoughtful. "Funny thing about this strip; must be a jinx or something. In all the time I had it, I never managed to take a buck's worth of metal out of it."

"That's the way it goes sometimes," Sam said. "I guess you can't expect to hit on all of them."

Doyle Pryor squinted out the port. "Funny part of it is, there's just as much rock falls here as anyplace else. Only I never find any live ones. Least there's none here by the time I get around to look for them."

Sam felt a hot flush glowing in the back of his neck. "What's that supposed to mean?" he said.

"It's my own fault though, I guess," Pryor went on, ignoring the question. "I just don't get time to come over here often enough. Think I'll try to unload this piece as a matter of fact. Now that I'm here, I'll have a look around, and maybe first thing in the morning, I'll go over to the Tycho Settlement and see if I can peddle it off."

Sam Tuttle studied the man's face, conscious of the wild beating in his own heart. "What are you asking for it?" he said around the lump in his throat.

"Why? You interested?"

"I might be," Sam said, "if the price was right. After all it's near home and everything."

Doyle Pryor leaned forward, balancing his elbows on his knees. "All right, Tuttle—tell you what I'll do. I'll give you a real bargain. Just to get it off my hands, I'll let you have the whole hundred-and-six acres for two-thousand dollars. That takes in the whole crater—right up to the edge of the ringwall."

"I don't have that much," Sam said flatly.

"How close are you ready to go?"

Sam stubbed out the cigarette in the recessed ash tray, allowing his arm to brush against his money belt. "I'll give you a thousand!" he said suddenly. "Take it or leave it—"

Pryor shrugged his shoulders. "I'll take it," he said. "We'll close the deal tomorrow, over at the Tycho Settlement."

Sam got up, fumbling with his belt buckle. From underneath the jumper-liner he extracted a sheaf of bills. "We close it now," he said evenly, "or the deal's off."

Pryor edged over to the port, scanning the slate-gray floor of the crater. Without turning, he said, "Seem's like you're in an awful hurry. Maybe I should have a look around before I close any deals."

"Now," Sam repeated, "or forget

about the whole thing?"

From the compartment next to the dashboard, Pryor pulled out a piece of paper and wrote out a temporary bill-of-sale. "I'll draw up the regular deed soon's I get over to the settlement," he said. "When it's ready, I'll drop around with it."

When the money changed hands, Sam Tuttle walked back to the lock door and started to put on his jumper. Just before he dropped the helmet in place, he said, "You won't mind getting off my land now, will you, Mr. Pryor?"

WITH Pryor's International, the job of moving the stone would have been a cinch. But Sam Tuttle didn't have Pryor's equipment. The rock was awkward—hard to handle because of its shape. Furthermore, the chain-joint had a habit of slipping off the shaft-wheel. It took nearly two hours to dig it loose and get the meteorite securely fastened to the shovel-tail back of the tractor.

The green earth was just resting on the razor-backed ringwall of Clavius, when he nosed over the ridge of hills that flanked the pillbox.

He could see Raymond's face pressed against the port, watched him turn, and in a moment, Elvera too came to the window. When he opened the inner lock door, Raymond rushed up to meet him. "Let me help you, Pop," he said.

Quickly, Sam withdrew the football-sized piece of rock he'd chipped from the part of the meteorite that corresponded to the horse's nose. "Get your gloves, son," he said.

When the boy returned with the gloves, he placed the stone in the outstretched hands. "Put it on the table in the workshop," he said.

"Be careful, Raymond." Elvera was standing in the center of the room watching her son disappear through the door to the shop. Sam went to her and placed both hands on her shoulders. "Hello honey," he said.

She managed a thin smile. "Is it—is it enough?" she said.

Sam put his arms around her, conscious of the straight black hair brushing against his cheek. "Plenty," he said. "There's enough right in this little piece for our fare back home, and over a ton more of it outside."

"Pop—" Raymond had come back into the room. He stood by the shop door regarding his parents with pointed curiosity. Embarrassed, Elvera broke away from Sam's embrace. "I'll start making dinner," she said.

Sam watched her walk over to the electric stove. Then—with Raymond at his heels—he went into the workshop.

The rock was on the bench where his son had placed it. Gingerly, he picked it up, then set it down again. It was still cold—cold as the deep space from which it had come. From the back of the bench, he secured a counter. The needle jumped wildly.

"Is it worth a lot of money, Pop?" Raymond asked.

Sam nodded abstractedly. There was something odd about the rock. Like most meteorites it contained veins of iron and was quite smooth. But in other places tiny holes punctured its surface. They were perfectly round—almost as if they'd been drilled.

"I heard a story once," Raymond was saying. "It was about some crook who stuffed a meteorite full of luminous paint and sold it to another fellow for a lot of money. The man who bought that sure was dumb, wasn't he, Pop?"

An odd ringing sound that all but drowned out his son's voice was ringing in Sam's eardrums and a cold-white feeling welled up in his throat. From the tool-rack, he grabbed a thin-faced chisel. Deliberately, he jammed the tool into one of the holes. Felt its point press into something soft—something that the room temperature was just beginning to thaw out.

Sluggishly, a thin river of sparkling liquid spilled onto the workbench. He stepped back, unaware that his movement had knocked his son to the floor.

"Elvera!" he called.

AT THE north end of the corridor-laced honeycomb of pillboxes that make up the Tycho Settlement, Doyle Pryor, sitting at the American Bar, had just finished telling his story for the fourth time. A few of the regular customers guffawed happily. Most of them didn't. Even in this rugged outpost there were those who failed to find any humor in one of Doyle Pryor's typical business deals. And curiously enough, Marion Stark, sitting on the adjacent barstool fell into this category.

Perhaps it was an enigma that Marion Stark should be among those to criticize the ethics of anyone. Nevertheless, she was—despite her indecorous occupation by earth standards—a young lady of extremely high principals when it came to business dealings. Furthermore, she was a little drunk, which probably accounted for why Doyle Pryor suddenly found the bottom five inches of Marion's whisky and fizz-water dribbling down his thick chin.

He got up. Angrily. Wiping his face on the sleeve of his tunic. Marion got up too, a little unsteadily, and knocking the stool over.

"I think it stinks!" Marion said evenly.

Pryor looked stunned for a moment. Then abruptly with his open palm, he struck her sharply across the face. "Why you dirty slut! A fine one you are to tell people how they should run their business!"

Marion gave her head a quick side-wise jerk throwing her blonde curls back over her shoulder. She rubbed a set of red nails over the hurt spot. "It stinks and you stink!" she repeated defiantly. "Who do you think you are that you can go pushing people around?"

Pryor sat down with his back against the bar. "Go way," he said. "Go way and leave me alone. Bounce over to Huang's place and try to drum up some business for yourself."

The girl puckered her red lips into an

expression of studied insolence. Methodically, she pushed her index finger against Pryor's chest and twisted it. "Tell you one thing Buck. My business is a damn sight more respectable than yours. That's for sure."

Quickly, before Pryor could answer, she turned away. A little unsteadily she sauntered across the room and disappeared into the south corridor.

Pryor managed a grin at the bartender. "Nice people you let in here, Barney," he said.

Barney poured out a drink without comment.

"What's the matter with you?" Pryor said. "You're supposed to agree with the customers."

"I do agree with the customers," Barney said flatly.

"Meaning?"

Barney shrugged.

"You think she's right and I'm wrong. Is that what you're trying to say?"

Barney set the bottle down in back of the bar.

"Let me tell you something Barney?" Pryor said. "To stay alive on this hunk of rock, you've got to be thick-skinned. You got to take the other guy before he takes you. Even a guy like Sam Tuttle—a weak little man who doesn't belong here in the first place—even he, was out to take me over. Think it over a minute Barney. Tuttle was out to take me, and I took him instead! What's wrong with that? Suppose that rock *had been* full of metal? Do you think anyone would feel sorry for me? They would not! They'd be glad to see him take me, cause Tuttle's a weakling like themselves—a weakling who couldn't hold on to a million dollars for a week, even if he had it right in his hands!"

Barney rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe you're right Mr. Pryor," he said. "It makes sense when you put it that way."

IN THE comparative seclusion of his workshop, Sam Tuttle sat surrounded by the assortment of gadgets he'd ac-

cumulated. Most of them were incomplete—lacking in hard-to-get parts. Others were complete, but of no practical value. All had one thing in common: no market value.

Elvera—after her initial outburst had subsided—settled to a mood of silent hostility. Even Raymond, it seemed, followed his movements around the blister with thinly-veiled contempt. Yet despite the discord encountered within the foot-thick walls of the place he called home, Tuttle was totally lacking in any desire ever to work the pits again. A man could take just so much, then he ceased to care one way or the other. Elvera was right. In all his life, he'd never engaged in a business deal which had been consummated to his advantage. Elvera hadn't said it exactly that way. Her wording had been a good deal stronger—punctuated with more adjectives. It had also presented a truer picture of him—a picture he wasn't proud of.

Morosely, he let his eyes wander about the room where the debris of a thousand dreams lay stacked like so much rubbish. In the far corner, almost hidden under a pile of wires lay a broken-down electric motor . . . He'd been rewinding the armature, when . . . He stopped . . . The thought was an impossible one. Impossible because it was too—incredibly simple . . . If it were practical, it surely would have been done before.

Nevertheless, he crossed the room and began tearing into the heap of wires. . . .

It was after 1500 when Raymond came into the workshop to call him for lunch. He went out. A helping of canned beef and beans was set out on the table. Elvera was in the other room. When he sat down, Raymond went in to join his mother.

It was part of the new order. No longer did he join them at mealtimes. Instead Elvera and Raymond ate first, then retired to the other room.

He was on his second cup of coffee, when Raymond burst into the room. "Pop, there's a tractor coming over the

ridge! It's a big one. Mom says she thinks it's—Pryor!"

Sam got up and squinted out the port. It was Pryor. Even as he watched, the big red vehicle stopped outside the lock and the door swung open.

Sam Tuttle turned to his wife. "I'm going into the workshop, Elvera. When Pryor comes in tell him I'm in there!"

Moments later, through the partition wall, he was aware of Pryor's voice. "I've got the deed to that piece of property your husband bought, Mrs. Tuttle. I promised I'd drop around with it."

Sam waited—waited for his wife's answer. There was none. Just the sound of footsteps retreating into the other room. There was a long silence. Then he heard Raymond's voice, "Pop's inside the workshop. He says for you to go in there."

More footsteps, lighter ones this time, followed by Pryor's tread—heavy, even in the light gravity. The door opened. From his seat at the workbench, Sam looked over his shoulder. "Come in Mr. Pryor," he said.

Doyle Pryor walked in and sat on the edge of the bench. "Just thought I'd bring this deed around," he said. "Was over to the Settlement this morning and had it drawn up. I think you'll find it's all—" he stopped; a bewildered look crept over his face.

Sam turned, following his gaze to the center of the room. "What's the matter Mr. Pryor?" he said. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

Pryor didn't answer. Instead he walked to within two feet of the object that held his attention. It was the piece of meteorite Sam Tuttle had chipped from the larger stone. No mistake about that. It was shaped like a horse's nose. And like a horse's nose it bobbed up and down in mid-air, squarely in the center of the room!

FOR a full minute, Pryor squinted at the strange phenomenon. Then, a little awkwardly, he passed his hand over it, searching for invisible means of

support. There was a trick to it—there had to be a trick to it! Afraid to touch it because of the vibration, he finally turned to Sam. "What is it? How do you make it stay up there like that?" he asked.

Sam turned up his hands. "I don't know," he said. "I don't know how it works. I just brought it in from outside and that's what happened. Maybe it's the heat of the room—or something."

Pryor watched it thoughtfully for a while. Then he walked to the window. Outside, he could see the rest of the rock still strapped to the tractor. He turned back to Sam. "Got any idea what makes it do that?" he asked.

Sam managed to look puzzled. "I don't know," he said finally. "I never heard of any rock that acted that way before."

Pryor eyed him suspiciously. "You mean you never heard of—of—"

"Heard of what?"

"Never mind. Skip it . . . you know Tuttle. I'd like to own a piece of that rock."

"You would?"

"Yeah. I'll pay you for it—pay you good."

Sam moved the stool to the center of the room and sat down directly under the stone. "I don't know," he said. "Something that can do tricks like that, might be worth a lot of money."

"I'll pay you a lot of money!" Pryor said bluntly.

"What do you call a lot of money?"

Pryor dug into his jacket pocket and came up with a handful of big bills. He threw them on the workbench without bothering to count them. "There's over \$11,000 here. It's all yours for this rock, and the piece that's outside!"

Sam Tuttle picked up the bills. After Pryor had pocketed the receipt he'd given him, he started for the door. "I'll load the big piece on my tractor, then I'll come back for that," he said.

Sam sat down at the bench and began counting the bills.

"I thought you said there was no such thing as a shield stone, Pop?"

Sam turned. Raymond was at his elbow. Elvera was behind him in the doorway. "Guess what honey?" he said. "I just sold my shield stone for \$11,000." He waited—waited for the favorable reaction that never came. Instead, his wife's face wrinkled into a tight, hard knot.

"Sam, you didn't? Why it must be worth millions . . . It's the only one ever—"

Sam held up his hand. "Wait a minute, honey. Let me explain, or should I wait till Pryor gets back and explain to you all at once?"

"What's there to explain?" Elvera asked impatiently. "There's a solid piece of rock floating in the air. How do you explain that?"

"Simple," Sam said. "I did it with my little gadgets."

"You mean you've discovered a gadget that will make a rock float in the air?"

"If the rock contains iron, yes."

"I'm afraid I wouldn't understand it then," Elvera said. "I'm not very bright about things like that."

Sam looked at the floating rock lovingly. "On the contrary, honey, this one's so simple, even Raymond would understand it. I guess it's because it's so simple, that nobody ever thought of it before."

"Tell me how it works, Pop?" Raymond asked.

Sam jerked an index finger at the ceiling. "Well son, first I hooked up an electromagnet under the ceiling insulboards so that when current is applied, it would tend to draw any object composed of iron toward the ceiling."

"But it isn't on the ceiling," Elvera interrupted. "It's halfway between the floor and the ceiling."

"It's at the point of equal force," Sam said smugly.

"What's that Pop?"

"The rock is hanging at a point where the gravity of the moon and the force exerted by the magnet are equal. That point will vary depending on the strength of the magnet and the size of

the object to be suspended. In this case it's about halfway between the floor and the ceiling," Sam said.

"You mean you have that rock balanced at that point of equal force?" Elvera said.

SAM grinned. "Well—not by itself. To do it I had to employ another gadget. It's an old one too—almost as old as the electromagnet itself." Sam pointed to one of the junk-filled shelves that lined the room. "Concealed behind those cans," he went on, "is a common, ordinary, electric eye. Its beam is directed across a spot just above this point of equal force, and it's hooked up to the electromagnet underneath the ceiling. Can you figure it out for yourself from there?"

Elvera stared at the rock, still vibrating in the center of the room. "I—I think so," she said. "As soon as the metal in the rock is pulled toward the ceiling, it's path crosses the beam of the electric eye, which in turn shuts the current off. Then gravity takes over, pulls it down a little till the electric eye can take hold again. Then the whole thing begins over again."

"Exactly," Sam said.

"That's what makes it shimmy, huh Pop?"

"Yes Raymond. That's what makes it shimmy."

Elvera continued to look at the stone. "It's a wonderful idea, Sam," she said. "I wonder if it would work on earth?"

"I don't see why not," Sam said. "One thing's sure. We're going to find out. I'll need a bigger magnet and—"

He stopped when Elvera suddenly put her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry Sam," she said, "I take back all I said about you not being a shrewd business man. I want to be here to see Pryor's face when he comes back."

As if in answer to the request, a sharp rap suddenly sounded on the amber glass. With a wink at his wife, Sam went to the lock and ushered Doyle Pryor inside.

"I'll take that other piece now," Pryor said. "How'll we get it down?"

"Easy," Sam said. Quickly he walked to the wall and threw the switch that shut off the current. The vibrating motion of the rock suddenly stopped.

"Pop, look!" Raymond said.

Quickly, Sam reached over to pull his son out of the path of the stone . . . as it drifted slowly across the room.



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He let his eyes
rove over her . . .

Illustration by
HUNTER BARKER

A LITTLE red bubble of pain exploded just under his sternum, and semi-molten shards of glass pierced his heart. Fragments impinged the ulnar nerve, and the piercing agony darted

from his chest up into his neck and down his left arm.

The tennis racket slipped from his fingers. His young tennis pro yelled, "What is it, Mr. Henry? Are you ill?"

His body was under contract, but his emotions were his own

Before the pro could leap the net, however, four servants were at Barney Henry's side, peering, startled, at his contorted features. He felt their hands on his shoulders and calves. Tenderly, as they would a parcel of nitro-glycerin, they carried him inside the mansion and deposited him on his favorite contour couch.

The attack passed, and he waved the servants away. "Find Mrs. Henry—if you can," he gasped. "I—must see her!"

Their faces were blank, now. There had been no devotion in their faces, only fear that one of them might be blamed for mishandling an emergency. Barney watched them nod and leave his private bedroom-den, silently, stolidly.

He reached for a cigarette, then dropped his hand. Anything might bring back the attack. Still comparatively mild, but he'd have to do something about it, much as he dreaded it.

The first attack, two years ago, had been so slight he had tried to ignore it, after reading up on symptoms enough to identify the disease. But this one was getting down to business. The distress was more than he wanted to endure again, even if it did mean another trip to the body shop.

While he awaited word from his wife, Barney Henry, Davis Cup tennis star of the 1980's, looked down over his shorts-clad narrow hips and long bronzed legs. It was incredible that such a serviceable, carefully-attended body should fail him at 41 years of age.

He stared objectively at the limbs whose graceful agility had won him honors on the grass, clay and hard courts of the world, and which had finally attracted the eye of the wealthy Mrs. Wade-Simpson, heiress to the fabulous thorium-mine fortune of her dead husband.

It was an outstanding body, a lucky body, a great physique whose broad shoulders, strong neck, and proud head had earned its way in the world effortlessly. From Wimbledon to Australia, his perfect coordination, powerful serv-

ice and smashing backhand had crushed all resistance in straight sets for almost twenty years.

HIS LIFE had been financed by a succession of wealthy female sponsors, some married, some not. That he finally lost his bachelorhood to Anne Wade-Simpson—and under such a demanding arrangement—was the final tribute he paid to his precious body.

With her unerring timing and business instinct, Anne had entered her bid for his body at precisely the right moment. It was the afternoon he pulled a tendon in his forearm during an exhibition match. He had finished the set without letting the gallery know about the injury, but Anne had been watching closely.

Afterwards, he was sitting alone at a table under a striped umbrella, drinking Scotch and massaging his arm, when she came to him. He remembered looking up at her in surprise. For one thing, she was alone, which was unique. Usually she kept herself surrounded with companions or business associates, and a hovering of ever-present maids.

Secondly, it was the first real close-up he had enjoyed of the legendary loveliness of this woman in her late fifties. The texture of her skin had a teen-age fineness, and the daring, new, single-garment look of her spun-glass dress flaunted every lithe line of her fresh, firm body. He let his eyes rove over and through the translucent gown with his characteristic contempt for propriety, and he heard her breath catch.

Lazily he raised his eyes and enjoyed the effect of what he was sure must be a rare blush. "Anything I can do for you that my sponsor wouldn't object to?" he asked.

Her embarrassment was transmuted into mild pique, and she sat down without an invitation. "My name is—"

"I know, I know," he interrupted insolently. "How are you, Anne?"

"How am I? I feel like I was just

raped by a wild bull. You should do something about your eyes."

"Next time wear a slip. What do you expect in an outfit like that, and with the sun behind you?"

She accepted the rude tribute without comment and continued, "I came to inquire about your arm. Is it serious?"

"Suppose it were?" He knew very well it was serious. Torn tendons rarely mend perfectly.

"I doubt that your present sponsor could afford the repairs," she said bluntly. "It would be a shame if you had to give up tennis."

Repairs! Not treatment, *repairs*, she had said. The remark drove home the magnitude of this woman's wealth. Barney had heard of the extra-legal "body shops" that existed around the world, but only the richest of the rich patronized them so casually that they spoke of "repairs" instead of treatment.

"IT WOULD be a shame," he agreed, eyeing the smooth curve of her neck and speculating on the expense of surgically maintaining seventeen-year-old breasts at her age. "It would be a nasty shame," he repeated. "What do you propose?"

"Marriage," she said simply.

He stared at her incredulously. "Oh, come now," he said, "I'm not under contract to my sponsor. We don't have to go through all that formality if you want to—"

"I know all your previous sponsors well," she told him. "They recommend you highly, but I'll have no part of such a—a random arrangement. In fact, no alliance appeals to me especially, but my—my advisors tell me I should marry. They refuse to guarantee my health unless I do."

The cold proposition frosted his ego. "Then why don't your advisors provide you with a suitable mate?"

Her eyes were gray and level. "They wanted to, but I've been watching you for years. You please me. Your tennis-

playing is more graceful than dancing. It reminds me of music."

"I see," he said sarcastically. "We can make beautiful music together."

"It is possible," she replied calmly. "In fact, I am told, it is rather necessary to my welfare."

"But why marriage?" he insisted.

"Call me old-fashioned, selfish, jealous or what you like. I shall insist on an exclusive."

"I'd like to think it over," he said.

"Of course." She laid a small card before him. "Call me when you decide." She arose and walked away from him, into the sunlight, and his mind was made up before she reached the shade of the club's veranda.

Her attorneys drew up the odd marriage contract. As he suspected, the agreement which he was required to sign circumvented the State community property laws. In the event of a separation or divorce he waived any claim against her estate.

But more remarkable was the stipulation that he consign his body to the hands of "certain medical specialists as designated by the party of the first part, who shall henceforth have complete control of the maintenance, repair and disposition of the body of the party of the second part."

In shorter words, her attorney explained with excruciating tact, Barney Henry's body became the property and responsibility of Anne's "advisors."

"This word, 'disposition'," Barney objected, "I don't like it."

The attorney shrugged. "You may debate its legality, but it would behoove you to remain married to Mrs. Wade-Simpson if you once become her husband."

"The hell with it," Barney shouted and grabbed for his hat. The pain that screamed up into his elbow brought him up short. He could never expect his tennis to support him again. Suddenly, the integrity of his body became the most important thing. After all, Anne's advisors only wanted to keep him in per-

fect health. So what if they did cut down on his smoking and maybe forbid liquor? It wouldn't be exactly unbearable.

In the end he signed the paper. They were married quietly, and on his wedding night he was forced to congratulate himself on his "choice" of a bride.

ANNE, he discovered, was two women. She was the brilliant, calculating business woman who, in five years of widowhood, had grasped the reins of her husband's mining empire and continued to increase the holdings. She was the efficient executive, capable of minute planning of every detail of her business and social life. Every motion, every decision had purpose behind it. Every appointment, every guest in her great, modern castle of a home brought her profit, in wealth or pleasure.

And then there was Anne, the wife. She demanded little from him in companionship. He was welcome to accompany her on her trips abroad, she accepted his company when he offered it at her parties and entertainments, but she left his social attendance upon her to his own decision. Subsequently, he found himself seeking her company rather than dodging it, as he had supposed he would.

In only one department was she demanding upon him, and in this respect he did not object at all. No one had ever had occasion to question his virility, and he met the challenge of his exorbitantly healthy wife with more than dutiful compliance.

Whereas Anne spent a whole day once a month at the body shop, Barney, twenty years her junior, had only visited the fabulous surgery once, and that was occasioned by the necessity of replacing the damaged tendon in his right arm. He was in no hurry to return.

It was an awe-inspiring place, this glass and brick hideaway, buried in the mountains and available only by private helicopter. Barney disliked to think about it. Not that he objected when

Anne told him about receiving a new kidney transplant, nor was it that he missed her the week that her annual ovarian renewal kept her away. It was just that he preferred to hold the illusion that his wife was the young, passionate, child-like person she seemed to be when she crossed the threshold of his quarters.

Her private, casual mentions of taking shots and glandular reactivations nicked at the illusion, reminding him of her increasing age. The concept of "old women" and their "kept" young men preyed upon him more than he'd admit to himself. As long as Anne appeared the vibrant young matron, his self-respect was more easily fooled.

And so four delightful years had passed, marred only by the single previous attack of angina which he had not reported to Dr. Jackson, their personal physician who checked him over monthly.

It gave him some satisfaction, as he lay weakly on the leather contour chair, that this trip to the body shop would be at his own request and not due to any complaint from Anne or the physician.

WHEN the door opened behind him he was thinking about the genuine security that came from great wealth. Only fools disparaged a fortune that could buy health like a new tennis racket. Anne had confided that she expected to live to be over two hundred years old. Man's expected span was still under a hundred. It paid off being married to one of the wealthiest women in the world. It paid off in the most precious—

"Barney, dear, you're ill!" She rustled into the room with quick, purposeful steps, stopped at his feet and regarded him solemnly. "Dr. Jackson will be here in a few minutes."

"It's angina pectoris," he said, thoroughly enjoying the distress in his wife's face. "All the classic symptoms. I'm afraid it's me for the body shop."

"Yes, of course," she said. "I shall

miss you, dear." Tears rimmed her eyes, and he wondered how anyone could have started the gossip he had heard in the old days, gossip that damned the widow Wade-Simpson as the most heartless operator on Wall Street.

True, she was ruthless with her employees, her associates, and even the stable of U. S. Senators who fed at her political board. But Barney had never had cause to complain. In her passion and her consideration for his welfare she was a consistent paragon of unselfishness. And now her tears were interest on the wealth of security this marriage had brought him. For most men of 41 an attack of angina meant death or years of precarious, tasteless existence in the shadow of fear. But not Barney! A week at the body shop and he'd be better than new.

He had no idea how they arranged it, where they found donors for the organs that were always available for transplantation—at a price. He wasn't even interested, just grateful that he could afford the price, and that he'd be completely well before long.

"I *shall* miss you," Anne was repeating, dabbing at her eyes. She was dressed demurely in an expensive black dress, thoroughly opaque—she had abandoned the vicarious pleasure of wearing the one-garment, translucent costumes when they were married.

"Don't worry, baby, they'll take good care of me. I'll be back before you know it."

"I—I want you to know—that you've made me very happy, Barney," she said, "just in case—anything should happen."

"What could happen?"

"Well, nothing, probably, but I wanted you to know."

Warm, sympathetic, compassionate, that was Anne. He smiled to himself and ignored the precarious feeling in his chest. A knock at the door turned Anne's head. "Come in!"

Dr. Jackson strode in, pulling a stethoscope from his side pocket. He listened to Barney's chest and a recitation of the

symptoms. "Have him prepared for immediate removal," was his laconic order.

IN THE doctor's presence Anne became reserved. Barney noticed, but it didn't bother him. That was Anne's way before outsiders. "How long will it take, doctor?" she asked quietly.

"Can't tell. We'll have to explore to discover the extent of cardiac damage. If it is merely sclerosis it is a simple matter. We'll call you this evening."

They worked fast in this profession, Barney discovered. In a half hour he and the doctor were airborne. In two hours he was stretched naked on the high, narrow operating table, numb as a block of ice from the shoulders down. A pair of masked surgeons were busy opening his chest, tying off blood vessels and probing intimately about his pericardium.

The palliative drug in his brain left Barney totally conscious, but placed him objectively once-removed from the proceedings. With mild interest he watched the two pairs of plastic-coated hands become blood-spattered as they delved in and out of him under the shadowless glare of the surgical illumination. Their instruments flashed hypnotically, and he sensed, rather than felt, the cutting, pulling, nudging about his interior. It was as prosaic as taking your Cadillac to the garage for an overhaul.

The fear of death never occurred to Barney. The body shop, being a creation of the ruling business class, was run on hard business principles. The wealthy paid dearly for the illegal services, but would brook no failures. Every operation, every treatment was on a strictly contingent basis, Anne had explained. If a grafted organ withered and failed or a patient failed to recover, there was no fee paid.

Under such conditions these medical renegades pitted their skills against the dollar. The family of a dead patient filed no protest—and received no bill.

No apologies, no excuses—just put up or shut up.

The first indication Barney had that all was not going well was when the two surgeons stopped work briefly to stare into each other's eyes. One jerked his head backward questioningly, and the other nodded. The first grunted, and a male nurse left the table.

In a moment the surgeon to Barney's right moved aside to permit a great console machine to roll alongside the slab. Once again instruments slapped into the hand of the doctor to his left, and after each motion a flexible hose was fed into the opened gash. The soft, rhythmic murmur of the machine was peaceful, and reminded Barney of his heartbeat.

Now two hands without instruments reached in gently and lifted. A great, pulsating, darkly red object came out, trailing slime and semi-coagulated blood. To it were fastened a spaghetti of large and small hoses that ran to the console.

BARNEY was left alone, numb, helpless and, he realized, heartless. The wave of darkness that swept in at the moment of the transfer rolled past, and the light came back. The machine throbbed, and now each audible pulse was synchronized precisely with the surges of blood in his ears and throat.

The palliative drug was wearing off, and Barney wondered if the anaesthetist were neglecting him. Suddenly he realized that he was not breathing. Then he remembered that it wasn't necessary. His blood was being aerated by the machine. The eerie feeling was enhanced by the ghostly voices that muttered in consultation beyond his range of vision.

A deep sigh punctuated the earnest conversation, and silence fell for a long moment. It was like a cue, the last cue in a play which has ended in a hushed, dramatic scene. The next voice spoke up normally, loudly, like an actor moving backstage to remove his make-up. "Call Dr. Jackson. Get Mrs. Henry on the phone. Get Colter in here, too. Tell

him to bring his price list. She'll give us an argument."

A shuffle of feet obeyed the impatient commands, and in a minute Barney recognized Dr. Jackson's voice. "What is it, doctor?"

"Mild occlusion, doctor, but apparently of long duration. Hopeless cardiac impairment. Look at that ruined tissue!"

The words pounded into Barney's ears with heedless brutality. Hell of a way to talk about a man's heart within ear-shot!

"We have a call in for Mrs. Henry. I want you to satisfy yourself, as her physician, that replacement would be necessary. She's so price conscious, you know."

Jackson's voice replied, "Yes, I know. Hmmm."

Price conscious? Where *his* life was concerned? Barney smiled and would have laughed aloud had there been air in his lungs. They didn't know Anne very well.

Another set of footsteps entered the room, clapping heavily. The new voice was male, husky, jovial and vibrant. It was a voice that went with the rubbing of hands together.

It should have belonged to a master bond salesman.

"Good evening, doctors. We have a problem?"

"Hello, Colter. This is Dr. Jackson, the patient's physician. He'll back you up when you try to sell a new boy to Mrs. Wade-Simpson-Henry."

"What's the matter with that beautiful side of beef over there?"

"Heart. Dr. Jackson will explain to her. You make the sale."

"A transplant? Lord, that will cost her!"

"Either way that's best. Just don't lose her business."

"I think it would be safer to—"

A female voice sounded with the flat inflection of a loud-speaker, "I have Mrs. Henry on the line."

"Put her on."

ANNE'S voice said, "Hello. Is that you, Dr. Jackson?"

"Yes, my dear. We have your man open, and we need your approval on our decision."

"My approval? On what, the expense?" Her voice was crisp and emotionless, but Barney knew that she'd dispense with all this silly indecision in short order.

"Yes, Anne. The heart is irreparably damaged. The moment it was removed for examination it went into fibrillosis, but degeneration was so advanced that the next attack of angina would have finished it anyway. I'll have Mr. Colter, here, tell you about the cost of replacement."

"Hello, Mrs. Henry. Nice to hear your voice," Colter spoke up.

"Let's omit the amenities," Anne said tersely. "What about Barney's new heart?"

"Well, as you know, it's a vital organ, and all I can do is quote you a tentative figure. Cardiac contracts have run from 2,500,000 to 4,000,000. The last one was let's see—" The faint rustle of paper reached Barney's straining ears. "—it ran 3,500,000."

"That's exorbitant. Do I have to take my business to Italy to get reasonable prices?" she demanded with the carefully outraged tone that Barney knew so well. It was her dickering voice.

Colter purred casually, "Of course it might be somewhat less, and we do have a better alternative. As a matter of fact your advisors recommend a unit replacement."

"What's that?"

"We can provide a replacement for the whole person of your husband from our wide contacts."

"Don't be ridiculous! Barney is well-known. His disappearance would be impossible to explain. Besides, I'm fond of him."

"But the replacement would be a physical duplication. We catalogue men of every dimension, who would eagerly accept such a contract. A little facial

surgery and personality conditioning and no one will know the difference—except you, of course. Incidentally, the virility factor can be adjusted to your needs much more readily with such a replacement. You know how reluctant your present husband has been to submit to routine alteration."

"But Barney hasn't needed any—"

"He would have, eventually, and it would have been a source of disagreement between you. That's why your advisors frowned on your method of selecting a husband at the outset. The independence factor invariably asserts itself. Now *our* replacements need no coercion for scrupulous compliance, and you'll be happier in the long run."

"You can make one look just like Barney?"

"Identical."

"How much would that cost me?"

Barney's eyebrows quivered. She was carrying this casual bargaining too far. Of course, she didn't realize they were calling from the operating room or she'd never have hurt his feelings this way.

THE cost to you is the most attractive item. That's why we favor a total unit replacement. We can't say for sure, but on a trade-in basis there should be no expense at all. As a matter of fact, you might even show a little profit."

"I don't under—oh, I see what you mean."

Barney didn't see what the velvet-throated body-salesman meant at all. In what kind of absurd transaction did one trade in an old model for a new and show a profit?

"And then," Colter added suggestively, "there is always the attractive prospect of enjoying a fresh personality."

"Yes, there's that," Anne agreed.

Anne, Anne, what are you saying? Isn't it enough to humiliate me by bargaining, without implying that I've been nothing to you but a bedroom convenience? I'm your husband, your lawful spouse! For God's sakes, order me a new heart and have done with this

ghoulis business!

Barney's lips moved faintly, but no one noticed.

"The time element is something, too," Colter pointed out. "Minor cosmetic surgery is a matter of days, whereas cardiac replacement requires several weeks of convalescence."

That seemed to decide her. "Very well, I'll have the replacement—on the trade-in basis. But mind you, I'll demand an itemized accounting for Barney's disposition."

He quit listening at that point. The numbing cold that gripped his body seemed to seep up his neck into his skull. There was no doubt now that Anne had betrayed him, but he couldn't grasp the full significance of what use he, a man without a heart, was to the doctors. What possible value could they place upon him as a trade-in?

A heavy, thucking sound came to his ears, as though a huge refrigerator door had been opened. The trundle of cart wheels and the rattle of glass containers followed, and then the thump of the door closing again. A technician came into view, pushing the high cart, his white mask billowing slightly with every breath.

Now the surgeons were back at his side. Barney glanced at the glass containers of various shapes and sizes, in which liquids sloshed slowly to rest. The labels fascinated him. They read, *Liver*—*Speen*—*Kidney*—*Testes*—etc. But, except for the clear liquid, they were empty.

A scalpel flashed, then paused. The surgeon was staring into Barney's face. "Good God! His eyes! He's still conscious! Perry, didn't you turn on the pentathol?" He swung and glared at the murmuring console behind him.

A female voice said, "Yes, doctor. I'm sure I did—oh, heavens the chamber is empty!"

The surgeon's voice was furious. "He heard all the conversation. And if I hadn't notice his eyes just now he'd have lain there and watched us—God Almighty, Miss Perry, how would you like to see yourself dissected and dropped into those jars piece by piece?"

"I—I'm terribly sorry!" Her voice was tearful. "Shall I get some more pent—"

"Don't bother, dammit! Hand me that!"

Barney was staring blindly into the lights, but his remarkably keen, wide, peripheral vision caught the motion as the heavy rubber mallet cut its vicious arc at his temple. And in that instant his confusion fled. With the clarity of the condemned he understood fully his trade-in value to the body shop, and why Anne might realize a profit on him after all.

This was probably the only business in the world where the spare parts exceeded the value of the whole.

The mallet crushed into his temple, his eyes crossed, and before them swam a million, brightly crimson stars—more than he could count in all eternity, but he began counting just the same.

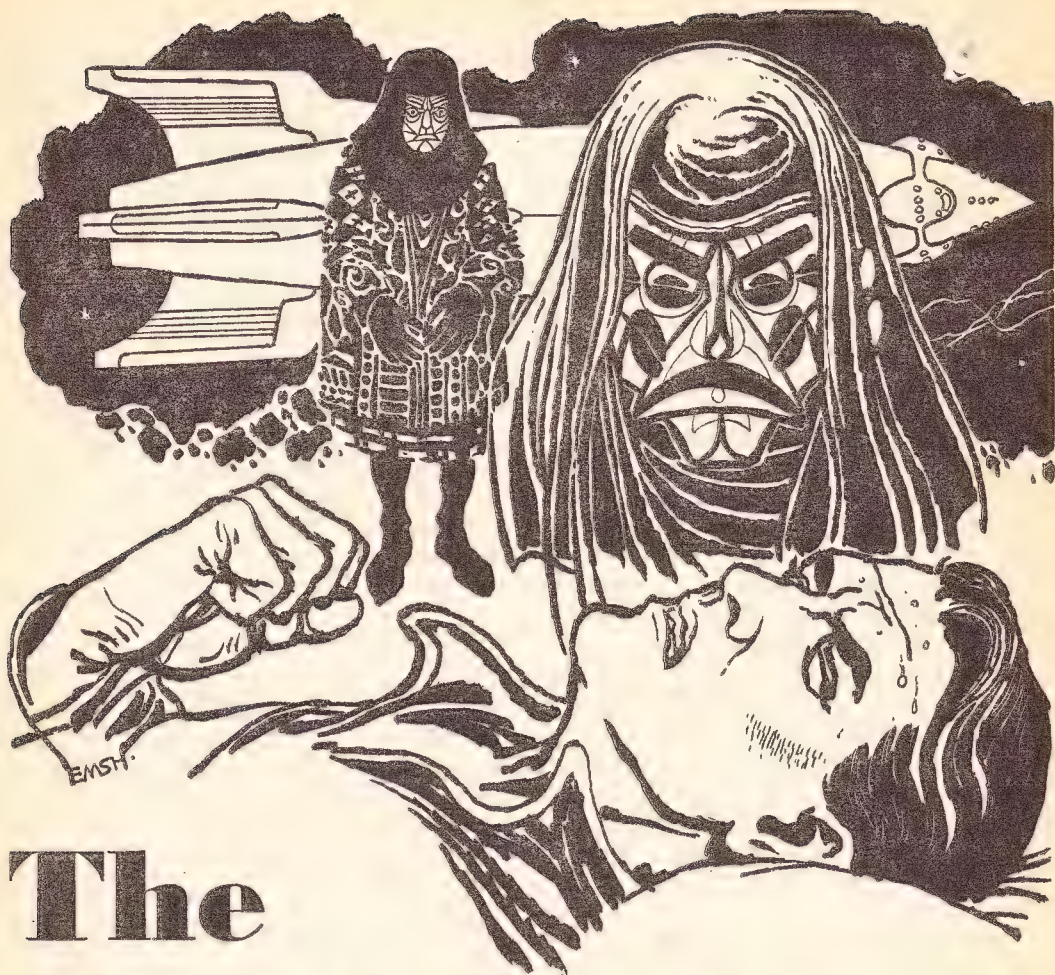
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The Child Goddess of Myr

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Illustration by EMST

*Pirate Monk Morgan, smuggler of bargeen juice, is halted
in midspace—and hustled to a sourpuss civilization where
you can't swap stories or kick about the temperature. . . .*

I

THE FIRST sign that anything was wrong came from the needle on the deceleration dial. The *Linnet's* gentle coast to earthfall was not following the curve which had been punched on the auto-tapes. In fact if the ship kept on braking at this sharply increasing rate she would be stationary before she reached measureable atmosphere, easy prey for any roving customs cruiser.

Three years of running *bargeen* juice from Venus; three years of exhilarating cops-and-robbers games with Terra Security Control. And now, at last, the luck seemed to have run out.

Monk Morgan tried without success to

lift his large frame from the accy-decy couch. Too many G's. A lot too many G's, he said to himself, blood pounding behind his eyeballs, though his head felt queerly empty. Monk, friend, the laugh's on baby because in about sixteen seconds baby's going to pass out.

The traitorous behavior of the *Linnet*, he thought, must be some new police trick. It looked, too, as if it were the last trick the T. S. C. would have to invent to put baby on ice.

Consciousness left him.

In the weird dreams which followed, love and hate were inextricably intermingled. Love of Astra, the golden-

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In the weird dreams which followed, love and hate were inextricably intermingled. Love of Astra, the golden-

haired Syrtis City dancer, whom Monk was to have married before it happened. Hatred of T. S. C. and all the interlocking maze of earthly officialdom which had combined to blame the wreck which had killed Astra on Captain Morgan's negligence, which had exiled Morgan from Terra, which had forced him into lonely and vengeful piracy.

It was a hatred which had not cooled a single degree in the four intervening years. It had earned the cautious respect of the other outcasts who had come to refer to Morgan as "the Cold Monk" because of his belief in headwork instead of gunplay, and because of his obstinate and unique celibacy. It had won Morgan a fortune which he had built into the *Linnet* till she was one of the fastest smugglers in the Sol System.

Oh, she's fast, all right, he thought, as consciousness seeped back into his brain. But what good does speed do if—

Suddenly he was wide awake and moderately astonished to be alive. He was not in a Terran prison, however. He was lying in his own bunk aboard the *Linnet*.

THOUGH no pulse came from the engines, his sharply tuned senses told him that the ship was in motion, probably in free flight. Save for himself, she seemed to be empty. The door to the control room was open. Without moving from where he lay, he could see that the controls were not manned.

Monk got to his feet, noting no ill effects from his blackout beyond a slight headache. He rubbed his forehead a moment, then went aft and checked the cargo — four precious pint flasks wrapped in lambs' wool.

They were still safely locked in the metal cabinet where he had left them. Each container was properly sealed and brimful of the ruby-red fluid which, even when adulterated ten thousand to one, sold for eight dollars an ounce to the patrons of the unlicensed dreamettes. At that, the customers were paying less than half the legal price.

Morgan frowned uncomprehendingly as he completed his examination of the fourth flask. No police, after all. No hijackers. Here he was, safe and sound in his own craft with everything shipshape, but on his way to some unknown destination, a destination presumably determined by something other than chance.

He replaced the cargo and mounted to the observation blister. At first he could not believe the evidence before his eyes. But there it was, plain to be seen under the diffused glare of light.

The *Linnet* was snugly moored in a gigantic hangar. Judging by the row of lifeboats along the far bulkhead and the two airlocks spaced beneath it, the hangar was but a section of an even more Gargantuan space ship, a craft such as the Sol System had never seen.

Monk hypothesized that this alien vessel had exerted some sort of unknown force which had markedly increased the *Linnet's* rate of deceleration. After she had been halted, she had been dragged back and eventually swallowed.

But why had her costly instruments been unaware of the behemoth from outer space? How had—

A sound behind and below him interrupted his thoughts.

"Please to descend ladder and answer several small questions now," the voice said. It was squeaky and senile, but obviously human.

Monk turned slowly. It was not his nature to react violently to surprise or danger. Though he possessed the brawn, he preferred to use his brain in the belief, so far justified, that he'd last longer.

When his glance fell on what was at the foot of the ladder, he momentarily thought himself back in boyhood on Hallowe'en. For the old man who had spoken was dressed like a child trying to imitate a bogey man.

His body, from shoulders to heels, was covered with a sort of black domino, embroidered with cabalistic designs in white and green. Beneath the hem

of the garment could be seen the edges of several vari-colored under robes. A black hood hid his head. His face was completely concealed behind a thick-framed black mask with an oval red panel where the face should be. Features were etched on the panel with a luminescent black substance.

Even the alien's hands were covered, with tight black gloves.

Never one to be too easily interrogated, Monk said, "You're the mystery man, friend. How's about letting me toss you a couple first? For instance, is it nice to gulp a person down like he was Jonah?"

The other fumbled about in his robes and produced a plain black mask. "Please," he said, holding it out. "It is not that I look at your face."

"Is it that bad?" Monk said. "Well, I like to cooperate, at least in the beginning."

He put on the mask. When he peered through the eye slits, the old man was flicking a little handle at the side of his own thicker mask. The face panel deepened in color, and a severe expression appeared upon it.

"You will answer questions now, at once," he said.

SOMETHING was so comical about the sudden switch of masks to match the mood that Monk could not help chuckling. Instantly the dominoed one shrank his head down between his shoulders and clapped both gloved hands over his concealed ears.

"Bird noises!" he squeaked in horror. "It is sacrilege! The great god Myr will punish now! I, Tharl, will punish now!"

From a hiding place in his robes he took a plastic tube with a metal handle and pointed it at Monk, who immediately managed to contain his amusement.

"Now let's not start having feelings," he said soothingly. "I'm just the cozy, teddy-bear type at heart. If you'll explain the rules, old boy, I'll try to give them a whirl." He added to himself, *Till I can think up something better.*

Tharl touched his mask and resumed the original pleasant expression.

"That is better now," he said. "Come, we sit down now and have the questions."

He pointed the way to the cabin, where they sat on the two bunks, facing each other.

"Number One question," the little bogey man said. "Temperature in this compartment now is normal for people on the planet to which you traveled? Un-hot like this?"

The atmosphere seemed warm to Morgan—perhaps about 75° F.—but till the drift of the quiz was established, it seemed desirable to keep Tharl happy.

"About normal," he said.

"Number Two question. The population of that planet now?"

"About four billion," Morgan said.

"Third question. They fight often now?"

"Well, no," Monk said, wondering what all this was leading up to.

"Explain, please" the alien directed.

"There have been no wars on Terra for a long time," Monk said. "The planet has been under a unified government since the year Twenty-twelve."

Tharl switched to an orange and white expression which seemed to convey his thanks. At the same time he passed his other hand down the breast of his domino and threw the garment back, exposing a harmonizing under-domino of silky texture.

"You will be suspended now," he said. "When you wake, we shall have reached Myr the Magnificent."

He closed his robe, changed to his original red mask and rose from the bunk.

"Wait a minute, friend," Morgan said. "Wouldn't it be sort of evie-Stevie if I got to ask a couple of questions now?"

"It is owed to you," Tharl said, flicking on his thank-you mask for an instant, and simultaneously touching the closure of his domino.

"Number One question now," Morgan said, unconsciously falling into Tharl's

own mode of speaking. "Why do you keep doing this sort of ritual dance with the masks and robes?"

Tharl turned on a raised-eyebrow mask. "All civilized races," he said, "perform the Communication Ceremony of the Mother Goddess Thaxia."

"Oh," said Monk. "Glad to be straightened out on that. You mean your people actually have to go into this routine every time they say 'Hi, Charley?'"

"But what else?" said Tharl. He reinforced the expression of his yellow mask by raising his voluminous undergarments to expose a few inches of a yellow silk under-robe. "At times, as you see now, one must also shift garments to the required mood."

"Seems like a lot of trouble and clothes," Monk said. "The textile business on Myr must be—"

But Tharl was gasping with horror and fumbling frantically at his shutter-mask. "Would you have us go *naked*?" he demanded, with a terrified expression. He pronounced the word "naked" as if it were a world-shaking oath.

"Some people do," Morgan said. "Or almost. I mean you take those silver-mesh bathing suits—"

But what would Tharl know about earthly styles? Or Monk, either, for that matter, after four years of no women?

THE old man's new mask seemed to convey pride. "No Myran," he said, "ever sees accursed *flesh*, even his own."

"But I don't see how—" Morgan began.

"At night there is darkness," he was informed. "At other times there are clothes. It is the will of the Mother Goddess and her Child that Reigns."

"Ah, me," Monk sighed. "The Mama Goddess's will is too deep for papa. How about this nix on laughing out loud?"

"The bird noises?" Tharl said. His mask denoted a sort of religious awe.

"The bird noises," Monk agreed, trying not to make any. "You pulled a gun

on me when I laughed."

"It is forbidden, now," Tharl said. "The Mother Goddess Thaxia forbids it, as does her Child, my niece, the Goddess Thardis of the Seven Outer Planets of Myr. It has been forbidden since before the Crossing, indeed since the reign of the Blasphemer, Thuma the Twenty-first—may Thaxia forgive this mention of her accursed name."

"Blasphemer, eh?" Monk said. "What'd she do? Loaf around without any clothes on?"

"To jest is also forbidden," Tharl said, wearing an angry black mask. "It is the will of the Mother Goddess and the Child Goddess, Thardis the Thirty-ninth."

"Who is also your niece," Morgan supplied. "You make it all so clear. But right now what I'd mostly like to know is what's going to happen to me?"

"Eventually," Tharl said calmly, "you will no doubt be executed."

Before Monk could say anything further, the old man had moved swiftly to the airlock and began to undog it. Monk jumped for him, in a rare—for him—exhibition of direct action. But even as he moved, a large golden capsule dropped from Tharl's robes. Plunging to the deck, it burst with a blinding radiance. Monk Morgan slept.

II

WHEN Monk came to himself, he lay on a pallet in a small, very hot room. There was no other furniture. On wall hooks hung a plain black domino, black tights, black gloves, a black hood and a black mask.

Monk glanced at the ceiling. Thin wisps of green gas were dissipating themselves through a grating. Perhaps the vapor had been used to arouse him.

Lowering his eyes to the dark-hued vestments on the wall, Monk made a mental pun about this being a black day for the Morgans, and laughed out loud at it merely because this might be the last time he would wish or be allowed to laugh.

Through the grating came a voice which he recognized as that of Tharl, uncle of the Goddess, or Queen, or whatever she was, of Myr, whatever it was.

"You will rise and dress now," the squeaky old voice said. "Dress completely. No tiniest bit of evil flesh must show, or death comes at once. In five *charla* I come to your cell to prepare you for the audience with the Child Goddess of the Seven Outer Planets."

"Why don't we just call her Rosie?" Monk said under his breath.

Child Goddess, he thought, as he donned the somber garments provided. So my disposal is to be governed by the arbitrary whim of an all-powerful infant who has been weaned on a lot of pseudo-religious mummary. I never was much good with children, either.

Shortly after he finished dressing, the door was unbolted. Through the crack Tharl's voice inquired if he were "now clothed." Being reassured, the Queen's uncle entered the cell.

He was followed by two individuals who appeared to be soldiers, since they wore helmets with attached metal masks and carried weapons similar to the plastic tube Tharl had displayed on the *Linnet*. Their uniforms consisted of many-layered sets of jackets, and pantaloons of various colors and lengths, the "uniformity" being confined to cut.

Tharl walked twice around Monk, inspecting his outfit. Satisfied, he said, "So that you make no mistake now, Morgan, I explain that which is to happen. Today is a Thirty-ninth Day, which is the day of woo-sport and of judgment. During the woo-sport, you and the other prisoners will stand at the rear of the audience chamber and make no sound. Is this clear now?"

"As a mountain brook," Monk said. "But I hope you're not finished."

"I will tell this thing," Tharl said. "You must not talk, or it is possible that the Child Goddess executes you, which is bad, as I have other purposes first."

"How kind you are," Monk murmured.

"Yes. I now describe the scene so you

do not then be tempted to ask questions."

"Excuse me," said Monk, "but where did you ever acquire your terrific command of the English language?"

"Thank you," said Tharl, flicking his mask. "I learned it from your mind in the days before I woke you in your little ship. Listen now, however. Thardis the Thirty-ninth, Child Goddess of the Seven Outer Planets of Myr—"

"Rosie," Morgan muttered under his breath.

"—will be seated at the far end of the hall. You will be curious about her dress, since you are uncivilized and know nothing of such matters. The Child Goddess's thirteen pettiskirts stand for the thirteen seasons. The seven different colored mantles represent the seven outer planets. The fiery overgarment is the holy Star-Robe of Myr which was worn by the Mother Goddess Thaxia during the Crossing from the inner planets. The nine ropes of *zolama* gems are the years and days of the life and reign of Thardis. Around her waist the Child Goddess wears the Girdle of Eternal Power. Whenever she touches the hilt of the symbolic dagger, the guards must kill."

"Cheerful little party," Monk commented. "Couldn't we arrange to tie Rosie's—er—the Child Goddess' hands behind her holy back?"

"You said what?"

"I asked if I correctly understood you to imply that the Child Goddess is only nine years old."

"That is true."

"And she's been Queen since she was in the cradle?"

THARL said, "But of course, now. And should Her Magnificence choose a mate at the woo-sport today, their first-born girl child would at once succeed her as Queen."

"Isn't nine a bit on the early side to get fused?" Monk asked.

"But of course, now. The Serene Thardis will choose no mate today. The

last Goddess, Tholina, my sister, did not choose her consort until she was sixteen."

"I call that real self-control," Monk said.

"You said what?"

"I said who runs things when the Goddess is still goo-gooing."

"It is the duty of the priests of Myr to expound the expressions which the baby's hands choose to bring to her mask."

"You mean even the children are wrapped up this silly way?"

"But of course," Tharl said. "It is the holy law, not understandable to the uncivilized. Is there more you would know? The time grows short."

"Only one thing," Monk said. "Why do you keep it so hot in here when you have to wear all those clothes?"

To his surprise, both guards switched their masks to yellow and began to tremble. Tharl assumed a somewhat less terrified expression and displayed the hem of a yellow robe.

"You *are* uncivilized," he rasped. "You do not know what you say. But never pronounce such a thing again, for it is blasphemy, and the punishment is death. So that you are not again tempted, I will tell you that the temperature here is the natural one. In most buildings the air is cooled, but prisoners cannot be offered this comfort if it is denied to honest laborers in the fields."

"It's not so bad for me," Monk said, "but I'd be soufléd with all that stuff you've got on."

Tharl's mask turned to dark anger. "How dare you to blaspheme after I warn you now?" he said in a shaking voice. "Be silent or I destroy you."

The whole works would be funny, Morgan thought—ban on laughter, idiotic costumes, no talk of temperature—if you didn't have the crawly feeling in your stomach that a perfectly innocent remark might spark somebody into taking you apart with one of those wicked-looking tubes. He made up his mind to shut up and to stay that way

until he fully understood all the fetishes and taboos and shibboleths of the Seven Outer Planets of Myr.

As for Myr, just where in space was it? Terran astronomers would, of course, call the star by a different name. But of all the known stars within observable distance of the Sol System, none had any inhabited planets, let alone seven.

Myr, for all Morgan knew, might not even be in the Galaxy. It was possible that the Myrans possessed the requisite ultraspace drive, and this would account for the fact that they had been able to approach the *Linnet* undetected.

He was tempted to query Tharl about Myr's location, but he decided that such a question might be unconstitutional or something.

What disposition would Rosie make of him after Tharl's "other purposes" had been taken care of? Would that capricious young lady, as Tharl had hinted, simply flick on her special execution expression and touch the Girdle of Eternal Power?

Well, it had been a fun life. All except the large corner of it which had been devoted to the golden Astra of Syrtis. Morgan's end here, on the planet of an unknown star, would be as much the fault of the graycoats of Security Control as was his private three-year war against Earth. Some day, somehow, he would repay them. . . .

The audience chamber of the Child Goddess Thardis of Myr was smaller than Morgan had expected, and seemed suited to the years of the little girl who occupied the throne across from the single visible entrance. In her bulky, many-layered clothes, Thardis looked larger than Monk had expected, but still pathetically small to be in such a position of responsibility.

There was a cleared space around the royal dais, where persons who were perhaps members of the court squatted on individual rugs. Behind them was a double row of soldiers, one row facing the Child Queen, the other watching the group of black-robed prisoners and their

individual escorts, like Tharl. Behind the prisoners was another row of guards.

WE MUST be a desperate bunch of boys, Monk told himself, but was careful not to make any comments aloud to Tharl.

A tall Myran, sex indeterminate under the robes, who possessed a remarkable faculty for rapid change of mask expression, knelt before Thardis and bowed his head. In spite of his position and the dais, his face was on a level with hers. The Queen touched her mask and gave what was apparently a signal to speak. The kneeler uttered a gush of words in a high sing-song. To Monk it sounded like a ritual chant.

The Child Goddess flicked her mask, rose from the throne and removed the fiery Star-Robe of Myr, a garment made of an iridescent material which shone with a million blue-white pinpoints of light. Underneath was a pale gray garment slashed with pink.

Tharl touched Monk's shoulder. "The woo-sport robe," he whispered. "Now the reading of the Holy Writ of Thaxia."

An attendant presented the Queen with a huge, gold-bound volume. It was so heavy that the little girl had to fight to keep from dropping it as she struggled back to the throne. Monk, who never before had been consciously touched by childish difficulties, felt sorry for her.

A sweet, melodious young voice came from behind the Queen's new silvery mask panel. The assemblage, including all the prisoners except Morgan, began humming a monotonous dirge as background for the reading. From time to time Tharl would stop humming and whisper an explanation of the words of the scripture.

"The Goddess has now commanded the Fleet to make ready for the Crossing," he said once. And again, "Myr, the Burner, now destroys the life of Thandor, the Second Planet." And finally, "The multitude now gives thanks to the Goddess on the Plain of No Heat,

and she miraculously causes them to be clothed in the warm garments of holy communication, saying, 'Lo, it was sins of the flesh which caused the angry god Myr, the father, to burn, so this I, his daughter, do declare: The flesh is evil, the flesh shall no more be seen by the children of Myr, lest he burn the outer planets also. And whosoever in evilness of heart dares to see the flesh after his day of birth, then shall this one be sacrificed to the great God Myr, Father of us all!'"

The Child Queen touched her shutter-mask. An attendant bore the heavy volume away.

"The woo-sport now," whispered Tharl.

Five figures rose from the semi-circle of Myrans squatting around the open space before the Queen and removed their dominoes. Underneath they wore what appeared to be jointed, plastic armor of a milky opacity. Their helmets covered the entire head, with slits for the eyes. Their outer robes had been of diverse colors, each perhaps representing a family, but now it was impossible to distinguish between the warriors.

The five bowed before the Child Goddess, touching their helmets with their right hands, as if they were trying to flick the shuttermask which was not there. The Queen changed her mask to crimson. The warriors positioned themselves at intervals around the open space, and each drew from his belt a weapon composed of a metal cylinder with two parallel black rods protruding from it.

The Queen flicked her mask. The pairs of black rods arced brilliantly as their users aimed them at each other and simultaneously tried to dodge the invisible beams emanating from the weapons.

Monk Morgan realized that the cylinder-rod gadget was a contragrav device when one of those taking part in this unique battle royal took a hit. He rose several feet off the floor before the

attention of other adversaries forced his assailant to release him from the beam. The victim fell to the floor with a clatter of armor.

"The one who wins," Tharl whispered, "may be chosen by the Goddess, but she will not choose."

AFTER a few moments of furious dueling, one hapless suitor was dropped to the floor from a height of many feet, and did not get up. Three of the remaining fighters then concentrated on the fourth and eliminated him. Immediately thereafter, two of the victors dropped their erstwhile partner on a corner of the Queen's dais, where he sprawled in a spreading pool of blood.

The child ruler changed her mask, indicating, according to Tharl, that she was highly pleased with the "sport."

The duel between the last two warriors seesawed for a time without major damage. Finally one battler managed to drop his enemy from a height of five or six feet. Loud cries of horror rose on all sides.

At first Monk thought that in some way unknown to him the audience had been able to tell individuals apart, and that their favorite had been prostrated. But a fall of only a few feet should not have elicited such an immediate and automatic chorus of dismay.

Monk noticed then that everybody but himself had averted his or her gaze from the downed warrior, who was struggling to his feet. Erect, the man glanced about at the crowd, apparently surprised at its reaction, then down at his thigh, where the plastic armor had split, revealing about an inch of leg.

A muffled scream came from his helmet. The Child Goddess, head still averted, dropped a small, gloved hand to her Girdle of Eternal Power. Instantly a half-dozen guards sprang forward. Blue flame spat from their weapons. The warrior crumpled to the floor. A guard seized the man's domino and threw it over the corpse.

The winner by default of the battle

royal stepped to the dais and knelt. The Child Goddess rose, took off her "woosport" garment and let it slip to the floor, then put on the Star-Robe of Myr again.

"He is rejected now," Tharl whispered. "If Her Magnificence had chosen him, she would have handed him the garment."

Monk's curiosity was too much for him. "But why did she execute the other one?" he asked.

It was clearly the wrong thing to have said, for Tharl's mask became ominously black.

"*Flesh!*" he hissed. "Will you never learn?"

III

THE time had now arrived for Monk's group to be heard. Each black-dominoed prisoner was accompanied to the dais by the Myran who had been standing with him. This one did all the talking, while his "client" remained silent with unchanging mask.

Nine years old or no, Thardis apparently handled the cases satisfactorily, because murmurs of approval greeted most of the decisions, including one where the offender was executed on the spot.

At length it became the turn of Tharl and his charge to step forward.

"She wears a friendly mask now," the Queen's uncle muttered. "It is good."

He approached the throne, bowed deeply, and began a rapid-fire spiel in Myran, with much switching of masks and twitching of robes.

When he finished, the Child Goddess' mask changed to black. She asked a sharp question. Tharl evidenced an apologetic mood, but his words were firm. From among the bystanders he summoned three, two of whom, judging by their posture and gait, were elderly. A lengthy argument ensued, with an important bearing, Monk suspected, on the future prospects of Monk Morgan.

Finally the little Queen shifted her

black mask and touched the hem of a saffron undergarment. Then, to Monk's surprise, she said in low, melodious English:

"We would question the otherworldling directly."

"But how did you learn—" he blurted, but was cut short by a heavy blow across the shoulders.

"On your knees, fool, if you would live," Tharl said.

The Child Goddess' mask expressed the nearest approach to amusement that Monk had yet seen in a Myran, but perhaps amusement was a royal prerogative.

"No, tell him how we learned," Thardis said.

Tharl said stiffly, "Morgan, you do not know how long you slept after we arrived here. Her Magnificence was pleased to learn your language, as I did, so that she might better understand your expression of your conscious thoughts."

"Yes," said the smooth, low voice. "And we thought it would be more—pleasant."

Monk possessed toughness of character, and experience. Ordinarily he paid no attention to children, and was more or less unaware of their existence. But the voice of this child touched some hidden string within and moved him. He wished he could see her face.

"Is it true," Thardis asked, "that your homeland is cooler than the planets of Myr, yet otherwise much the same?"

There was no reason to withhold the answer, since he had already told the Queen's uncle this much.

"I guess it's some cooler," he said. "At least in winter. But we don't—"

He hesitated. He had been about to point out that Terrans did not wear so many clothes, a fact which could affect one's judgment of temperature differentials, but decided he might collide with a taboo.

"From the little I've seen," he said, "other conditions are about the same."

The Child Queen's mask denoted sat-

isfaction. "It is good," she said. "Our men of science are firm in the belief that the outer planets of Myr, like the inner planets before them, are growing progressively hotter. If our civilization is to survive, they say, we must find a new home. On all seven planets there are but eight hundred and fifty million of my children. Would there not be room for them among your people?"

There it was, spelled out in capitals. The Myrans had been exploring the stars to find a new world. They had captured Monk Morgan in the neighborhood of a planet which seemed suitable, and had carried him to Myr for questioning. He, the Cold Monk, who had outwitted some of Earth's best minds, had thoughtlessly told Tharl the truth about what he wished to know, and had thereby opened Terra to a dangerous colonization scheme.

OF COURSE he wanted revenge on T. S. C. and certain other individuals on Earth. And such revenge should be easy to obtain if the Myrans achieved a conquest. But the idea of helping aliens to subdue an entire populace, most of whom had done Monk no harm, was repellent to him.

At all costs he must try to repair his error. He must try to persuade the Child Goddess and Tharl that Earth was no potential home for the people of Myr.

"I suspect," he said, "that the Terrans would strongly resist your settling among them."

"How could they resist?" Tharl asked. "Our arms are superior to any in the Galaxy."

"Maybe so," Monk said, glumly reflecting on the probability that the Myrans possessed the ultraspace drive. "But you'd have to prove it. And if my people realized that resistance was hopeless, which I'm not prepared to admit, there are other considerations. Terran customs, Terran clothes, such as bath—er—ah—are certain to offend your religion. And I'm not convinced that in summer you'd survive the climate."

Tharl said, "You speak differently now than you did before."

"We think we should look closer before deciding," the Child Goddess said.

Tharl said quickly, "Then it is the will of Her Magnificence that an expedition be sent to investigate more thoroughly, and perhaps to negotiate?"

"Yes," Thardis said. "And we shall lead it personally."

"But Magnificence!" the old man protested. "We cannot permit you so to expose yourself."

"Expose?" the girl said. Again she appeared to be faintly amused. "Is that a proper word to use in our presence?"

Tharl registered apology. "But I still insist," he began, "that the—"

"We have made up our mind," she said stubbornly. "Morgan will, of course, accompany us so that he may help us to make peaceful contact. And if he has not spoken the truth—well, if we can persuade his people to accept us, we can certainly persuade them to give up a person who's hostile to our friendship."

The precocious child said it sweetly, but a chill went down Morgan's spine. The Cold Monk, the smartest smuggler of them all, might as well face it. If he could not make the Myrans' opinion of his world coincide with what he had said, Earth was in danger, and he himself was lost. But what to do?

Before Monk Morgan again saw the Child Goddess, the blue-white disk of Myr had disappeared with the huge warship *Thiona's* jump into ultraspace. In the bow of the vessel was a small observation bubble, and it was to this improvised audience chamber that she finally summoned him. Tharl was in attendance, as well as a pair of guards.

Just as before, Monk felt drawn to the small, heavily muffled figure who sat in a carved and inlaid chair which was considerably too large for her.

The little Queen plunged at once into the problem which was on her surprisingly mature mind.

"You, Morgan," she said, "fear that we plan to conquer your people by force

of arms. On the contrary, we merely wish to persuade them to let us live peaceably among them, if conditions are suitable. We shall respect their customs, as they will respect ours."

"It won't work," Monk said flatly. "It won't work unless you change your customs."

"That is, of course, impossible," Tharl said.

"Then I think you're in for a shock or two," Monk said, as the dim shadow of a plan began to rise in his mind. "And here's a sample." He ripped off his mask.

The Child Queen screamed and hid her eyes. "Sacrilege!" cried Tharl. "The penalty is death!"

The guards seized Morgan.

"Wait!" Thardis commanded, keeping her eyes covered. "In his crude way, Morgan is perhaps trying to make us realize that faces are left uncovered on Terra. Well, we need not look at them."

But she took another quick peek between her gloved fingers.

SHE said musingly, "So that is a man's face. How complicated it is! Yet it has a certain charm."

"Magnificence!" Tharl said, aghast. "Even the Child Goddess may not jest."

"Perhaps we did not jest," Thardis said.

Tharl said gruffly to Monk, "When you arrange for our reception on Terra, you will ask that as a courtesy the welcomers wear masks. Later—well, segregation, education, force as a last resort."

"I still don't think you understand what you're up against," Monk said, mulling over his budding plan.

He felt a sort of triple responsibility—to his people, to himself and lastly to Thardis, for he was determined that any settlement of the Myran question must not bring harm to the Child Goddess. Why, if it weren't for all the silly taboos, he was sure that Thardis would grow up into quite a girl. It was not fair to let the child suffer because an outlandish

culture had been forced upon her by her ancestors of long ago.

He wished he could see her face. From her voice, it could be pretty.

Oh, come alive, Morgan, he said to himself sourly. She's only nine.

Aloud he said, "I'll arrange for the reception as best as I can."

Before he could arrange anything, of course, he had to win the confidence of Terran authorities who were anxious to blast him on sight. Well, the next-to-impossible was not new. In recent years it had been an almost constant challenge and had been as constantly met.

"My idea," he went on, "is to explain the purpose of your mission and emphasize the fact that you don't want any trouble. I'll suggest they send a cruiser to lead you into a fortified area so that our top people won't think I've set them up for a sneak attack from space."

"Can we trust you, Morgan?" the Child Goddess asked unexpectedly. Monk closed off the question from his thinking mind.

"Of course you can trust me," he lied. Some day, maybe, he could beg her forgiveness. Some day? What day? "But I warn you again that you're not going to like what you find."

Tharl said, "I am not at all sure now that I trust him."

"We trust him," the little Queen said softly. "Morgan will remember that he said we could trust him."

Feeling lower than the deck plates beneath his feet, Monk silently bowed his head. . . .

The Myran vessel jumped out of ultraspace and swung into an orbit around Jupiter, while Monk Morgan in the *Linnet* made one of his celebrated undetected approaches to Earth. With him he carried a mass of evidence of the truth of the story he was going to tell—photos, recordings and an illuminated copy of the scriptures of the Goddess Thaxia of Myr, its covers studded with unfamiliar gems.

Things went more smoothly than he could possibly have hoped. When he

gave himself up at Port Pacific, he found that the Myran ship had been sighted by the North Lunar Observatory and that feverish preparations were being made for an expedition to deal with it. The immense size and unfamiliar characteristics of the *Thiona* had convinced the authorities that they faced a formidable antagonist, and nerves were on edge.

Monk's evidence was eagerly received by the officials of Terra Security Control, and believed with surprising unanimity. After he had explained his plan of action, Osmer Phelps, Director General of T. S. C., said:

"It's bizarre, but it seems to offer the only chance to avoid bloodshed. If your idea works, Morgan, we may be able to effect some changes in your status on our books."

"You can take your books and—" Monk said. "All I want to do is help everybody but you and your boys. Our little war is still on, no matter what happens."

"Have it your way," Phelps said, with a glint in his eye. "It's my way, too."

ONLY a few hours after Morgan's arrival on Earth he was back aboard the *Linnet*. When at length he stepped through the airlock of the *Thiona*, the Child Queen received him at once.

"I knew we could trust you!" Thardis cried as he entered the compartment. It was the first time she forgot, in her excitement, to use the royal "we."

"Well?" demanded the Queen's uncle, assuming an impatient pink mask. "Will they receive us peaceably now? I warn you that any tricks will—"

"They will receive you peaceably," Monk said. "That I promise."

Peaceable the meeting would be, so long as the ship from Myr was under Terran guns and things went as planned.

"They must have three earthly days to make ready the reception," he said. And what a reception! "At the appointed time a cruiser will lead us in. I have the recognition data right here."

In the back of his mind was a picture

of the frantic activity which even now must be taking place at Saharaport. The generators being buried, the screens erected, the actors trained. The prime question now, he was sure, was no longer whether his plan would work, but whether the Myrans would thereafter retire without making a forcible effort to find a new home on Earth.

IV

AS THE mighty battleship *Thiona* floated down to Saharaport with a small Terran cruiser lazing along in her wake, impudent little guns trained, the six members of the official Myran delegation gathered at the forward airlock. They wore many layers of gorgeous, varicolored ceremonial vestments and shuttermasks with an extra complement of panels. There was no sign that any of the members carried arms.

Guided by a director beam, the vessel eased into a centrally located cradle. Bells rang. Power-driven dogs spun. Both inner and outer hatches of the lock swung slowly open.

A blast of hot desert air swept into the ship. As its searing breath touched the waiting Child Queen and her escorts, shuttermasks fluttered nervously. Morgan led the cumbrously-garbed group to the lock and onto the stage which had been moved against its opening.

There the tropic heat, intensified by the hidden generators, was so intense that it penetrated through the mufflings of the Myrans almost at once. Their astonished ejaculations changed to gasps of horror as they surveyed the reception committee waiting at the foot of the ramp.

There were perhaps a hundred black African tribesmen gathered there in the scorching sunlight. Not one of them wore anything but a mask.

Earlier the Child Goddess had been able to stand two quick glimpses of Monk Morgan's face. But he had correctly guessed that the sight of the naked savages would be unbearable to

anyone trained to regard the sight of flesh as mortal sacrilege.

Thardis at once turned her back to the "welcomers." Tharl pulled his hood over his mask and muttered what Monk took to be a Myran prayer. The other emissaries stood rooted by terror and dismay to the decking of the stage.

Staring at the oddly-clothed group with their furiously winking shuttermasks, the tribesmen burst into peals of raucous laughter, much to the relief of Monk, who had feared that they might fall prey to their own superstitions. Their mirth, fictitious at first, but now obviously genuine, spread until the entire spaceport seemed in hysterics.

This final blasphemy was more than the Myran delegation could support. They fled back inside their ship.

It had been Morgan's plan to leap to the ground and join the laughers, but he found himself hesitating. He felt reasonably certain that Thardis would not attempt to attack this "heretic" world but would search peaceably elsewhere for a new home.

Tharl, however, was something else again. Though such a course would be highly dangerous to himself if Tharl's counsel prevailed, Morgan decided he must stay with Thardis and back her up.

He followed the Myrans through the lock, which closed behind him. Tharl faced him, so angry that he forgot to manipulate his shuttermask.

"This is too much now!" he shrieked. "You have tricked us now!"

"I told you you wouldn't like it, friend," Morgan said calmly. "And I never promised to have them wear anything more than masks. If you wish to live peaceably on Earth, you'll have to get used to heat and few clothes and lots of laughter. I merely proved it to you."

The Child Goddess said sadly, without anger, "We shall return to the Outer Planets at once. To live here with these blasphemous beings would be a continuing sacrilege. Through the years to come, our scientists shall continue their search for a new home."

"No, Magnificence!" Tharl cried frantically. "We shall return to Myr, yes, but only to gather our forces and reduce this heathen planet. It is an offense before the gods and before yourself."

A SHIP'S officer approached and spoke in his ear.

"It is as I might have expected," the Queen's uncle said grimly. "Our instruments report that we are near the Ter-ran equator and that the temperature has been artificially raised. At the poles life would be supportable. As for the irreligious habits of the indigenes, we shall change those."

The other counselors agreed volubly, with a great deal of mask activity.

"And Morgan goes with us," Tharl added meaningly. "Give the order to blast off."

So he had lost, Monk thought. There would be war. And there would be no Morgan much longer.

"But must there be people killed?" Thardis asked unhappily. "We would give much to avoid that. Yet if the planet is suitable, it would be foolish to take the chance of finding another in the little time that remains to us."

"Magnificence," Monk said, "if I could but see you alone for a few moments after the Jump, I think I may be able to suggest a way out."

"He is not to be trusted," Tharl snapped. "He has proved it. I forbid any such interview."

"You what?" blazed the Child Queen, her mask suddenly black with anger. "Who rules over Myr? Who rules over Tharl?"

"You do," the old man said humbly. "A thousand pardons, but—"

"Bring Morgan to us immediately after the Jump," she commanded haughtily. "Meanwhile you may draw up plans for an attack."

When Monk was at last alone with Thardis, she said, "In spite of what you have done, Morgan, we still trust you. It is foolish of us, perhaps, for how do we know that your plan to avoid killing,

if you have one, is not another trick?"

"I'll explain," he said. "You saw those savages. They were at home in that heat, much more intense than the temperature on your outer planets. Does that mean nothing to you?"

"Blasphemous beasts!" she said.

"It's all a matter of habit," Morgan said. "You'd never even seen a body before, not even your—"

"Morgan!" she warned, rising.

"Sit down," he said. "We're going to have this out right here and now."

The girl made as if to move toward the door, then slowly sank back on the divan. "Well?" she said.

"If your people wore fewer clothes, and gave up some of their ceremonies, you could probably live for hundreds of years on the seven planets while you looked for a new home."

"What you say is impossible," she said. "Myr would burn us immediately. Man may not look upon his body."

"Don't you believe it," Monk said. "I'm not going to let a primitive fetish jeopardize my entire race. In fact I'm going to prove to you that you don't need all those idiotic wrappings. I'm going to prove it in the only way possible, and you're not going to like it."

He bolted the airtight door.

"You're going into your bedroom, small fry, and you're going to take off every single stitch you've got on, including your mask, and see if you drop dead. I personally guarantee you won't."

"But this is madness!" Thardis said in a trembling voice. "Move away from the door. We, Thardis, command it!"

He took her gently by the shoulders and held her. "I don't like to be mean to little girls," he said. "All the same, you're going into that next room and you're going to take off all that stuff. If you don't, I'll take it off for you."

THE Child Goddess of the Seven Planets had begun to sob. "But this is sacrilege!" she wailed. "I dare not!" For a second time she had forgotten to use the regal "we."

"The yard is getting overgrown with this sacrilege stuff," Monk told her. "I mean to chop some of it down. Now either you skin by yourself or I'm going to do it for you."

"I shall be damned forever! I shall die! I don't want to die!"

"If you don't do what I say, a whole lot of other people will die."

"I shall kill *you*, at least!"

"No, you won't, honey. Because if the experience you're about to have doesn't knock you off, you won't want to kill me."

"Yes, I will! I'll torture you, too!"

"Get going, sister. Next room, please. I'll give you ten."

He started to count.

"I hate you—I hate you!" Thardis cried, infuriated. "All right, murderer. I would rather kill myself than let an alien devil do it. And you shall watch it happen."

She wrenched herself out of Monk's arms. He started after her, expecting her to produce a hidden weapon, but such was not the method by which, in her innocence, she thought to kill herself. As he watched in amazement, she began frantically stripping off her gaudily colored Myran robes. Before he could recover from his initial surprise, she stood before him completely nude.

"Now I die!" she cried defiantly. "You have killed me, Morgan, who I thought liked me." She ripped off her mask.

Morgan had frozen rigid. For the "Child Goddess of the Seven Planets of Myr" was no child but a fully developed, if daintily built, woman whose beauty of face and body surpassed anything he had ever seen in life or picture.

"I—I—" he spluttered and then heard himself inanely accuse her, "You were supposed to be only nine."

"And so I am n-nine," she said brokenly, as the tears started again. "Only nine times has the planet spun round Myr since I was born. And now I die so young."

"Die, nothing," Monk said. "We're not having any dying around here this week,

especially not you. But you better put on at least one layer or you may—ah—catch cold."

He picked up a robe and draped it around her shining white shoulders.

A new light had come into the Child Goddess' brown eyes. "I feel different," she said. "Different from ever before." She gazed up at him intently, then removed the mask he still wore. "I like to look at you. Do you like to look at me?"

"Guess," he said.

"I don't understand why it should be wrong," she said. "And with only this one garment to cover me—why, it seems as if I had been set free."

"That's exactly what's happened," Monk said.

As if it were the most natural thing ever, she was suddenly in his arms, soft and yielding. And not a child. Not a child at all. "This does not seem wrong, either," she whispered.

"It isn't," he said. "It isn't wrong so long as you do it often enough."

"And now that you have given me a face," Thardis said, "I can even—what is it? Smile?"

"Probably the production had to be deadly serious," Monk said, "or the Communication Ceremony would long ago have been laughed out of existence."

"Laugh, yes," she said. "The bird noises. I must try that."

But she did not laugh. "The Ceremony still exists," she said. "The cult of Thaxia exists. When we reach Myr, the dream will end."

"Why should it?" Monk said. "The Child Goddess is all-powerful, is she not? The Goddess can change the customs of her people if it is necessary to preserve their lives and homes. The change may have to come gradually, but it can be done."

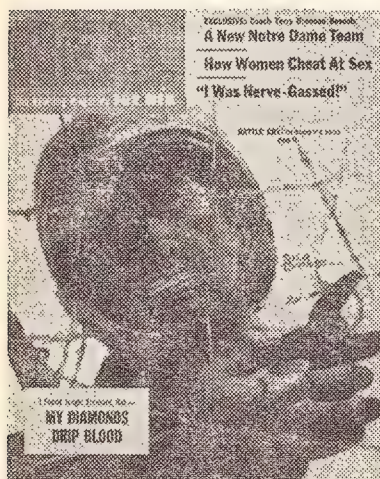
"Perhaps it can," Thardis said, "with you to help me, Morgan."

Blushing, she locked her hands behind Monk's neck and drew his face down to hers.

"Goddess," he murmured in her ear. "A goddess, all right, but no child." ●

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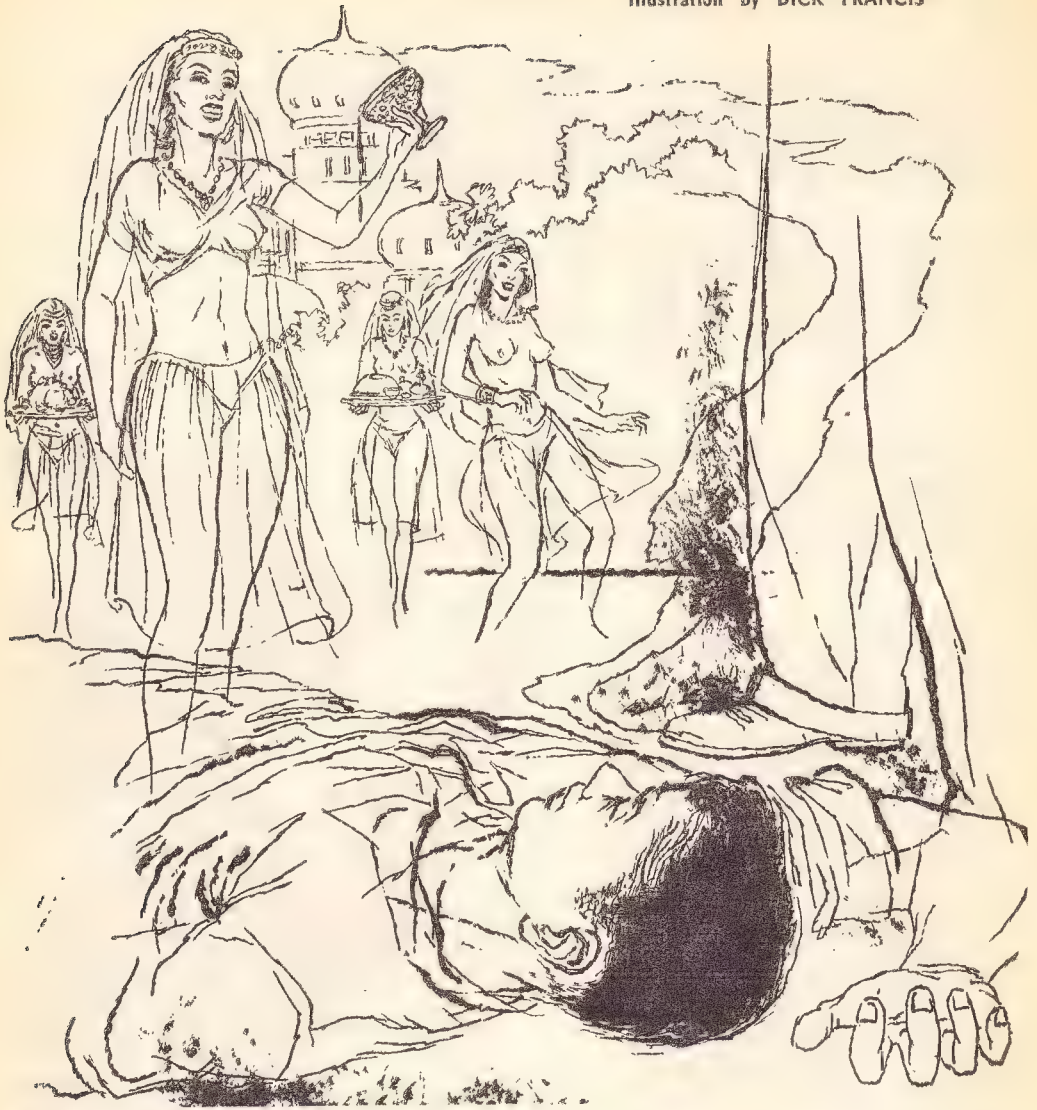
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A Dream...Dying

By **MACK
REYNOLDS**

"... each age is a dream that is dying,
Or one that is coming to birth . . ."
—Arthur O'Shaughnessy

MARTIN PAINE—that was his cell name, he'd had another one once—distributed his subversive leaflets in what he was sure was an unique manner. He took an elevator to the 14th floor of New Macy's Department Store, went to

An ideal can make a man brave—or destroy him!

the men's room and then, when no one else was present, brought them out from under his coat and tossed them to the crowded street below. Then he took an elevator down, and in moments was lost amid the thousands of shoppers.

Half an hour later he was subway bound, back to his one-and-a-half-room apartment and his mimeograph machine.

There was a satisfaction in doing it each time. A thrill that was but momentary, and then a glowing satisfaction for a period of as long as hours. Something like a narcotic, he told himself.

You ground out a hundred revolutionary leaflets calling for the overthrow of the State, the death or imprisonment of the leading Statists. Then, in one of a hundred ways, you distributed the leaflets to the people.

What happened then?

Out of every hundred distributed, possibly ninety-five were torn up or thrown away. Those thrown away, of course, always had a chance of being found again. Of the five that were read, at least four were assimilated in scorn or even rage, since the people as a whole were not yet pushed to the point where they were ready for revolt.

But the fifth reader! Ah, the fifth. That was what gave the thrill, the glow of satisfaction.

He slumped in his subway seat, hands in pockets, and thought about it.

That fifth person was already subconsciously in revolt against the Statists. It needed but the spark to be found in the leaflets to send him out for further information, and even, eventually, to seek membership in a cell and activity in the revolutionary movement.

Yes, there was satisfaction in the work, but it wasn't an easy task. The State controlled, in its industrial-feudalistic manner, the press, the publishing houses, TV and the movies, and even the schools and pulpits. And the revolutionists? They had, here and there, mimeographs or tiny hand-fed presses with

which to print their demands for fundamental change.

He reached his station, left the train and made his way down 125th Street to his apartment house. It was getting into the afternoon, but if he hurried he had time for one more batch of leaflets. It was his day off, and another week would have to pass before he could get in another full twenty-four hours of agitation. This was his life, his desire. For this one day of work against the State he slaved the other six days away. He stepped up his pace.

THE ELEVATOR no longer worked. He made his way to the fourth floor, unlocked and opened the door of Apartment 413.

And the man sitting on the edge of his bed said, "Hello, Paine."

It took him a full minute to comprehend the situation.

There were two of them. Big fellows. In the swank uniform of the S.D.I., the Statist Department of Investigation. One sat on the bed, a stun gun held negligently in one hand, the other sat on a chair which he had reversed so that he could lean his arms on the back.

The one on the bed said, "You've kept us waiting. How did the leaflets go?"

Martin Paine considered swiftly. *The poison capsule in the hollow tooth. Should he use it now? The gun in the drawer near the bed. Had they already found it? Was there a chance of getting to it?*

The one on the chair looked about thirty-five, about six feet in height, about two hundred pounds. Which made him Paine's age, but gave him three inches and forty pounds advantage over the revolutionist. Clear eyed and open faced, he was not the type you expected in a brutal secret police.

He said, "We're going to have to take you in, Paine. Is there anybody you'd like to notify? You have your rights, of course."

Martin Paine wasn't that rattled. He wasn't giving away any names. Never.

They had their methods of digging out information, but there was always the capsule in the tooth. It would need only a split second for that.

Meanwhile, there was no hurry. So long as he was alive there was a remote chance for escape. There was always a chance.

"No," Martin said, "there is no one to notify. Anything I've done was on my own. I have no connections with anyone else."

The S.D.I. man on the bed came to his feet, grinning. He holstered the stun gun. "What a coincidence that your leaflets read exactly the same as some of those picked up in Neuve Los Angeles last month." He motioned to the door with a flick of his head. "Okay. Let's get going, Paine."

He'd heard all about the S.D.I., of course. Give them their due, they were well trained. They didn't rush blindly into things. They worked it out until they had you, then they struck. Practically no one ever escaped, once they were ready to strike. Once you were taken to their headquarters, you were through.

There were stories about their methods. The various tortures they'd evolved, the ways of breaking one to the point where everything was spilled.

Not that there was much to spill, of course. Under the cell system, he knew no more than four of his fellow subversives.

And with this capsule in his tooth, even they were safe.

S.D.I. headquarters occupied a modernistic building of its own in the war blasted area which was historically the Bowery. He was taken to the thirty-fourth floor, tramped down endless corridors, ushered finally into a luxurious office, and left.

HE ONLY had time enough to gain a quick impression of deep rugs, a quarter-acre expanse of glass-topped desk, two or three heavy leather chairs, a well-stocked portable bar, and rows

of bookshelves. Then a door at the further end of the room opened and a slight, smiling young man in the uniform of a Colonel of the S.D.I. entered.

"Martin Paine," he said pleasantly. "Nice to meet you at last. I've been on your case for nearly a month." His amiability was such that the revolutionist all but expected him to stretch out a hand to be shaken.

And it was then that Martin Paine first felt fear of what was to happen. Then, nearly, he clamped down on the capsule. Then, before this went any further.

"Sit down, Martin." The other walked toward the bar. "My name is Clifton. Barry Clifton. Used to be a member of the underground myself. Drink? I imagine you could use one."

It might be a clever method of paralyzing him before he could utilize his poison. They might suspect he had such a device, have some method of getting it away from him before he could use it.

"No," he said. Then, wryly, "Thanks."

Martin Paine was surprised at his own *savoir faire* under these circumstances. Possibly it was the courage of complete despair, of resignation, that was keeping his voice steady, his wit functioning. He'd never thought of himself as a brave man. A stubborn one, perhaps, but not overly brave. But then he'd never faced a situation which called for bravery, certainly not this much of it.

Colonel Barry Clifton mixed himself a long drink from a decanter labelled *bourbon* and sank into a swivel chair behind the deep desk. His air of camaraderie failed to hide an undercurrent of the sinister.

"Sit down," he said again. "That chair over there."

Martin Paine sat down, suppressing a feeling of bravado. He hated Clifton. Hated his smiling face, his pleasant manner, his off-hand way of doing this. A cat with a mouse, he thought.

But Paine had him in the long run.

Because this mouse could call it quits any time he felt like ending the play.

The S.D.I. man leaned his head back, closed his eyes and recited, "Martin Paine. Born David Roy Gardner, Dayton, Ohio, in November, 1940. Two years of college. Social science. Four years in the Army Transportation Corps during the war. Rank of captain when the war ended. Since then, I.B.M. Supervisor on the third shift at the Staten Island *I. B. Farben Cartel* plant. Two years ago became acquainted with the underground through one Philip Sanchez, since, ah, *converted* by the State."

The revolutionist started only once, when his real name was disclosed. That probably meant that the family—Dad, Jimmy, his younger brother and . . .

There was no use thinking about it. There was nothing he could do—except bite his teeth together, whenever he felt like doing it. One hard bite and it was all over.

He said to the colonel, "All right, let's get to it."

COLONEL CLIFTON sipped his drink, smiled again. "Relax, Martin. That's what we're doing. Getting to it."

Martin Paine grunted, "Get to the torture, the attempt to break me down. You've got a surprise coming."

The Colonel's smile broke into a grin. "No. You have."

The revolutionist grunted again. He didn't argue the point, but they'd see who had a surprise coming if they thought they were going to get anything out of him.

The Colonel put his drink to one side and leaned his elbows on the desk. "You know," he said. "It's always the same. Every man I've interviewed in this room. Always the same. They're all waiting for the torture to begin."

"Well—"

"There isn't going to be any torture, Martin."

The revolutionist looked at him blankly. "Do I look stupid?" he asked.

"Believe me, if you did, you wouldn't

be here. The stupid ones we don't bother to pick up. We let them remain in your ranks. Obviously they do the State more good in your ranks than they would do out of them. Surprisingly enough, there aren't many of them. I'll admit, most of the adversaries of the State are competent men. That's why we convert rather than destroy them."

For the first time since he'd been picked up, the revolutionist smiled. "That's it, eh? That's the reason for the velvet glove treatment. I'm being converted." He would have laughed had he thought he could get it out smoothly, but his confidence had its limits.

Colonel Clifton said, "Let's get to business, Martin. You think that nothing could wean you away from the underground, convert you to the State. I assure you, it can be done. First we must break your present, ah, let's call it *character*."

Martin Paine had his poison. He said nothing. But he allowed a sarcastic sneer to twist his mouth.

The colonel shook his head. "Don't misunderstand. Torture is old fashioned. The public doesn't know it, nor does your underground, but we never use physical means in our, ah, work. Martin, do you know the most shattering thing that can happen to a man's conceptions?"

Paine scowled in puzzlement at him.

"What are your inner dreams, Martin Paine?" the S.D.I man asked softly.

"A better world," Paine snapped. "A world of freedom, the end of war, abundance for everyone, an end of the dictatorial powers of the State, useful employment for all at work they desire."

His inquisitor smiled mockingly at him until the end. Then he shook his head.

"No, Martin. Those are your ideals, perhaps. They exist on the surface of your mind. You're a typical product of our culture. From earliest childhood you've been taught a set of values that don't jibe with reality. To such a point have they been drilled into you that now, as an adult, you believe them—on the

surface of your mind, that is. Your subconscious knows better."

THE REVOLUTIONIST said, "This is a lot of crap."

The S.D.I. man shook his head again. "What are your *dreams*, Martin? Will you admit them? They're probably quite infantile, like all our dreams."

He waxed suddenly friendly and confidential. "Do you know *mine*? It will sound ridiculous to you now, Paine, but let me tell you. I've always dreamed of being a western gunman. Of killing Indians, of six-shooter duels. Most of all I dreamed of killing Wild Bill Hickok—shooting him down on the streets in a fair fight. Silly, eh? Of such things are dreams. Childish, eh? Even in day dreams I'd think about being one of those old gunslingers. It became—is obsession the word? I'm not a trained psycho-technician."

"And how does this affect me?"

The S.D.I. man laughed. "The thing is, the State *gave* me my dream."

The other's face went blank.

"Science progresses," the Colonel said. "The torture of the middle ages was painful, but on the whole quite ineffectual. Hitler, Stalin—they showed progress, but were still pitifully lacking in effectiveness. Certainly, Stalin's victims confessed, but who believed their confessions? Today, Martin, even the confessor believes, and joins actively the ranks of his opponents. As I suggested earlier, we no longer execute our enemies, they join us."

He came to his feet and went back to the bar, empty glass in hand. "Sure you wouldn't like a drink?"

Paine shook his head. "You go from one subject to another. Wild Bill Hickok and your kid dreams, then confession, then ancient times. I can't keep up. Not that I want to. You bore me."

The colonel returned to his desk with his refill. "Believe me, Martin, they are all connected. Your dreams and mine, your ideals and the State. The very fact that you have the intelligence and the

aggressiveness to revolt is sign enough to us that you should be a member of the State. Probably a lowly one to begin with, but a member, with the privileges and prestige which that means."

"Never!" Martin Paine snapped.

The S.D.I. man laughed aloud.

"The big secret that your underground has not discovered is this basic that I've been telling you about. The most shattering experience a man can go through is to have his most intimate dreams revealed and made true. It throws his whole, shall we say, *psyche*, into confusion. And that is what is about to happen to you, my friend. Just as it once happened to me."

"Don't be ridiculous. You said your dream was to kill Wild Bill Hickok."

The colonel nodded. "That's right. And I did."

MARTIN PAINE said very slowly, "I'm not really up on the history of the old West, but it has been my impression that this gunman, Hickok, died approximately one hundred years ago."

The colonel nodded. "Have you ever heard of alternate universes?"

"No. What's that got to do with it?"

The S.D.I. man took a sip of his drink, put the glass down again. "The theory—I should call it a law, really—is that the universe is not one, but many. There are, in fact, an infinite number of space-time continua existing simultaneously."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean, Martin, that there are other worlds than ours, other space-time continua. There are worlds, for instance, in which Germany won the second world war and Hitler eventually controlled the planet. There are others in which Hitler was never born. Others in which he was born but remained a paperhanger in Vienna for the rest of his life. You see, given an *infinite* number of alternate space-time continua, you will see that *everything* has happened, will happen, and is happening."

"That's ridiculous."

Colonel Clifton shook his head. "No.

Not only have our scientists proved the existence of an infinite number of other alternate universes, but we have developed methods to send ourselves from one to another."

"Then you mean . . .?"

The Colonel finished his drink. "I mean that the State has the power to send you into any kind of a world, into any period of history, that it wishes." His eyes grew reminiscent. "They sent me to a space-time continuum in which Wild Bill Hickok was still alive. I killed him in fair duel, and in so doing I found my real self. This is my job, my place in life—doing what I am doing now, wielding power, changing lives, serving the State. It is my life. I love it!"

Martin Paine was shocked.

The colonel's voice came back to normal. "No matter what it is your inner self desires, the State can give you your dream. The wealth of a Croesus; the military experiences of an Alexander or a Cortez; the thrill of invention of an Edison. And, I tell you, Martin, with the achieving of your most secret desire you at last find reality."

He came to his feet, picked up his glass, and made his way back to the bar.

Martin Paine snapped out, "I've changed my mind. I'll take one of those."

"Fine. Scotch, bourbon, cognac . . .?"

"I'll take what you're drinking."

The S.D.I. man grinned at him. "Afraid I'll poison you?" In clear sight he poured two slugs of bourbon into glasses, filled the glasses with soda. He stirred them with a swizzle stick and handed one to his prisoner.

Martin Paine said, "And how do you find this life dream? How do you discover what it is?" He took a deep swallow of the drink. It burned gratefully through him, renewing confidence.

The colonel shrugged. "That's comparatively simple. We put you into a drugged and hypnotic sleep. Under it, you talk your dream out. Later, we act on the information you give us."

Before Martin could realize that in some manner he had been given a drug,

before he could clench his teeth, the sleep hit him like a blow to his nervous system.

IN THE DREAM he knew he was dreaming. Way, way back in his mind he knew what had happened to him within the past hour.

He was in Xanadu. Samuel Coleridge's Xanadu. *In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a stately pleasure-dome decree.* That was all he could ever remember, word for word. But the rest of it was there. All that Coleridge had ever written—and more. For what the poet had left unfinished, Paine's dreams had not. He had been here before—often.

The springs and streams of wine. The groaning banquet tables. The gardens, the fountains, the fantastic luxury. Above all, the houri-like dancing girls.

He came out of the dream much more slowly than he had gone in. And for long moments he remained in that semi-state of consciousness that is the aftermath of dream-laden slumber.

It came over him in waves that what the S.D.I. colonel had told him was true. Thus far it had only been a dream for him. They could make it reality.

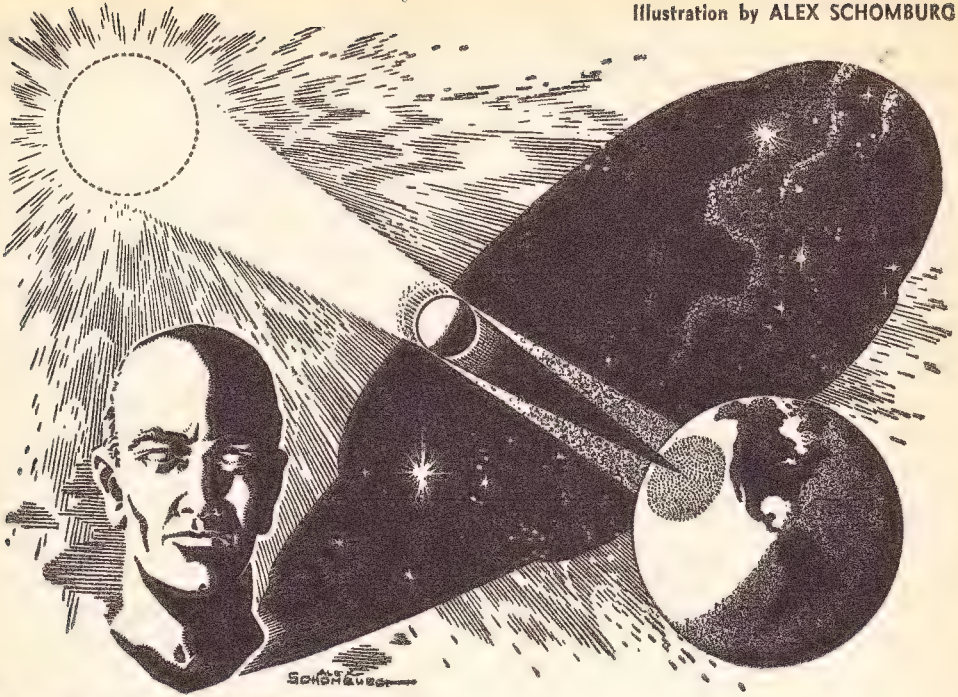
Let them give him the secret dream, in reality, and something would be gone from him. Now he could see the dream for what it was—a subconscious reaching for security, relief from economic pressures, love, beautiful girls beyond him in actuality. Pleasure, the comforts, the luxuries—wine without hangover.

His dream, the basic upon which he had based his revolt. He could see it now. He wasn't fighting for a better world and for the multitudes. Subconsciously he was fighting to achieve the things *he* dreamed of—wine, women, luxury, security for himself.

And the State wanted to take him in. It could give him all these.

As he came to full consciousness, with the smiling Colonel Clifton bending over him, the full horror of it struck.

For a split second he had strength. He tried for the capsule in the hollow tooth. It was gone.



COSMIC

By R. S. RICHARDSON

SHADOWS

LIGHT is our sole link with the rest of the universe. Practically all we know about the bodies of outer space has been derived from the light they send us.

Thus, in astronomy, we are tremendously concerned with bodies that shine, or bodies that are illuminated by the light from other bodies.

But did it ever occur to you that *lack of light* can be important too? This lack of light manifests itself by what we call shadows. Wherever there is light there must almost inevitably be shadows as well. Perhaps we seldom think of the shadows in space because of our innate dread of the dark. We instinctively associate evil or misfortune with shadows.

Thus we speak of a man as "being under a shadow" or we refer to some enterprise as "going into eclipse." As I recall, a vampire isn't supposed to have a shadow. And E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote a story about a man who had fallen so low as to sell his shadow.

Shadows in Space

If space were dusty enough, and you were endowed with supersensitive vision, you would perceive that the solar system is choked with shadows. Most conspicuous, of course, would be the shadows extending like long duncecaps from behind the planets and satellites. You can think of the length of a planet's

A Scientist Sheds Some Light on Darkness!

shadow in somewhat the same way that you think of the "f" value of a lens. As every camera fan knows, the "f" value of a lens is the ratio of its focal length to its diameter. If a lens has an f value of 4, then its focal length is 4 times its diameter. A lens with a diameter of 2 inches would have a focal length of 8 inches.

The following table gives the f values for the shadows of the planets.

To get the length of the shadows they cast, simply multiply by the diameter of the planet.

TABLE

The "f" Values for Solar Shadows

Mercury	42
Venus	78
Earth and Moon	108
Mars	165
Jupiter	620
Saturn	1120
Pluto	4300

Mercury, with a diameter of 3200 miles, casts a shadow that is 3200×42 , or 134,400 miles long. But Pluto, with a diameter of probably only a little larger—3700 miles—casts a shadow 15,910,000 miles in length.

Occulted Stars

The sun is not the only light source that cast shadows in the solar system. There are myriads of faint shadows around us, cast by the stars. But stellar shadows hardly have the form of dunce-caps or cones—they taper off so gradually that they are more like immensely long cylinders. For example, Sirius, which is the fifth nearest star to the earth—aside from the sun—casts shadows of the planets that tunnel into space for incredible distances. The shadow of the earth cast by Sirius is 270,000,000,000 miles long, if I haven't made a mistake in my zeros someplace.

These stellar shadows are of real practical importance to astronomers. When the shadow of the moon cast by a star passes across the earth, we say the star is occulted. These occultations are listed every year in the American Ephemeris, and a lot of amateur astronomers make it

their business to observe them. They are of value in that they furnish an accurate check on the position of the moon. The motion of the moon is our best means of keeping track of the variable rotation of the earth, something that is beginning to give ulcers to the astronomers who make it their business to predict the positions of the planets.

Solar Error

Occultations of stars by the moon are quite common, but occasionally a planet also occults a star. The most notable planetary occultation of recent times occurred on November 2, 1952, and was carefully observed in this country and Europe. On that night the earth passed through the shadow of Jupiter cast by *Sigma Arietis*, a star of about the fifth magnitude. The star vanished behind Jupiter about 4 whole minutes ahead of schedule, indicating that the planet is slightly out of its orbit. (But don't get excited and think the solar system is about to crack up. Such an error was not wholly unexpected).

The interesting feature about the occultation was the way the star disappeared. Photoelectric measures showed that its light dimmed as if the Jovian atmosphere must be composed of very light gases, such as hydrogen and helium. Also, motion pictures taken at the 100-inch telescope revealed that the star definitely vanished, and then popped out again for a moment about 15 seconds later. This coy behavior of *Sigma Arietis* is attributed, not to the earth's atmosphere, but to Jupiter's. It indicates that the upper atmosphere of Jupiter is in a state of violent agitation or turbulence. (Space ships beware!)

Not only did Jupiter get in front of the star, but one of its satellites tried to steal the show by pulling off an occultation of its own. Several hours before the main occultation, Europa or Jupiter II surprised astronomers by passing before the star. I was working at the 100-inch telescope that night and noticed that Europa was right in line with the star, but didn't suppose it would occult it. Later Professor Banachiewicz of Cracow announced that Europa had passed

almost centrally across the star, occulting it for two and one-half minutes. So far as I am aware, this is the only well-authenticated case of the occultation of a star by a satellite other than the moon.

Incidentally, the motions of the Galilean satellites of Jupiter, when viewed at the 100-inch telescope under high magnification, give the impression very strongly of being stations in space. First you notice what looks like a bulge or volcanic eruption on the limb of Jupiter. In a few minutes this detaches itself into a sphere hovering over the surface. The exciting part is the rapidity with which it moves. You get a vivid impression of the forces acting upon the body, in a way that no classroom demonstration could ever produce.

The Algol System

Besides shadows cast by the planets, there are also shadows of stars cast by other stars. This happens when a faint star gets in front of a brighter one. It is only by a rare accident that we ever observe such an event but, owing to the immense number of stars, we do catch a few. Such stellar shadows are produced in eclipsing binary systems that revolve in the same plane as the earth. The best known example is Algol. The amount of information that astronomers can extract from an eclipsing binary system is simply incredible.

Thus we know that the two main stars in the Algol system are separated by about $6\frac{1}{2}$ million miles. The brighter star has a surface temperature of $12,000^{\circ}$ K and is 2 million miles in diameter. Its average density is one-fifth that of water. The fainter star has a surface temperature of 3000° K and a diameter of $2\frac{1}{2}$ million miles. Its density is only one-twentieth that of water. The stars are not strictly spherical but slightly oval, due to the tides they raise on each other. Yet despite the fact that Algol the Demon is the oldest eclipsing binary known, we still have much to learn about it. There are slight irregularities in the system, due to the motion of a faint star, revolving around the main pair in a period of nearly 2 years. And very recently a mysterious fourth

body has been discovered revolving far away in a period of 188 years. How many more secrets does the Algol system hold for us?

Usually we are aware of shadow effects only when we are within the shadow ourselves. There are a few exceptions, as in the case of the shadows on the moon and the occultations of Jupiter's satellites. (Remember that we got the first value for the velocity of light from the eclipses of Jupiter's satellites.) There is another shadow effect which occurs in a small nebula associated with the star R Monocerotis.

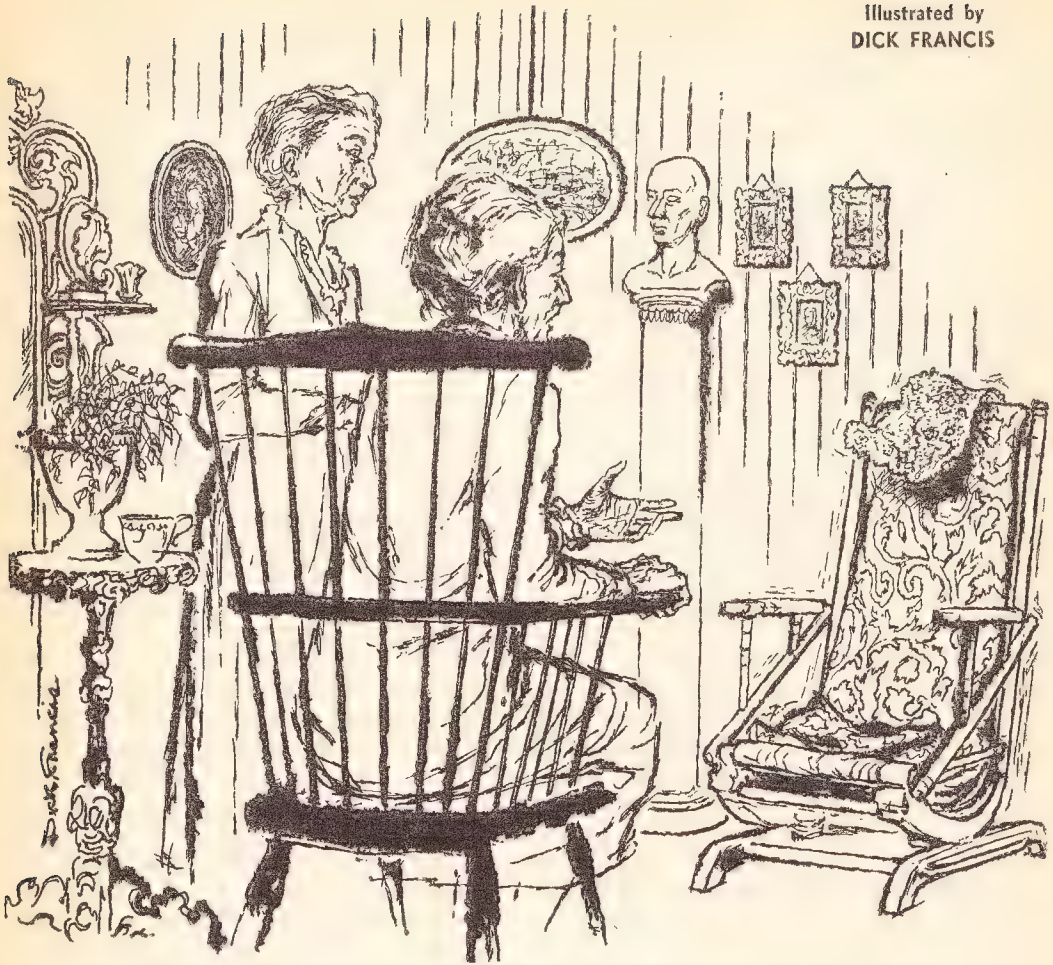
This peculiar nebula was studied for twenty-three years by the late Professor Lampland of the Lowell Observatory. (When I visited the Lowell Observatory in the spring of 1952 Clyde Tombaugh, the discoverer of Pluto, was developing some plates of this nebula which Professor Lampland had taken before his death.) Lampland came to the conclusion that the apparent changes and motions in the nebula were not due to disturbances in the nebula itself, but were produced by dimming and obscuration of the light from the star at the apex of the fan-shaped nebulosity. He found that the shadow bands that at times passed over the nebula were only temporary, for the affected parts later recovered their previous appearance in every detail. We are familiar with the shadows produced by clouds drifting over the face of the moon. But think of shadows produced by clouds of cosmic dimensions drifting over the face of a star!

The Twilight Bow

Finally, coming back to earth, have you ever seen the shadow of our own planet? It is easy to find, if the horizon is clear and there is no artificial light near. I have often pointed it out to people and have been surprised at the few who have ever noticed it. Generally they think it must be a thunderstorm brewing in the east. But it is only the shadow of the earth upon the atmosphere.

Next time you have the chance, see if you can spot the "twilight bow."

Illustrated by
DICK FRANCIS



"Emotions," said Miss Dora, "are delightful. . . ."

INVASION

By Douglas and Dorothy Stapleton

MISS DELIA scolded the philodendron for wetting her nice new doily. "That was naughty. Very naughty. Wetting my beautiful doily I spent weeks and weeks crocheting."

Miss Delia bit her thin old lips because she knew perfectly well that was an outsized fib, and that she had crocheted the entire set in only three evenings hand-running.

'A Flying Saucer Landed — and a Young Man Stepped Out!

To make up for the scolding she lifted the plant and shook it playfully.

"But I mustn't blame you, must I, darling? Dora probably gave you too much water. She does, you know, when she gets to *looking*."

As if the mention of her name had materialized her, Miss Dora drifted wispily down the stairs, one hand trailing gracefully along the bannister in a pose as out-of-date as her gray chiffon, but one she considered fetching. Not that it had fetched her anything substantial but Miss Dora still clung to it, hopefully.

As she descended she waved airily to someone outside the window set in the turn of the stairs and came on down, one hand fluffing out her hair, a lively plaid from two recent and unfortunate experiments with home dyes. However, the combination of burnt orange and a color Miss Delia referred to as "dish-water green" seemed to please Dora.

She paused before a chipped and dusty girandole and peered into the mirror, trying several rather charming smiles before she decided on the one with secret sorrow in it. She turned away from the mirror and held the smile for four gliding steps before she forgot about it, and let her face go blank.

Miss Delia had navigated the crowded Edwardian clutter of the parlor, clucking dolefully at the dust and chatting amicably with the plaster head of Dante, a bronze dolphin that looked uncomfortably like a catfish with asthma, and a group of astonishingly modest and bovine nymphs.

"I'll be right back and dust you," she promised them impartially. "This very morning. You shan't have to wait another day. Not an hour."

She backed into the swinging door to the kitchen, bumping it open soundly with one beamish hip and started to sidle through, holding the philodendron aloft in both hands like a libation.

SHE GLANCED uneasily back at Miss Dora and whispered to the kitchen

door, "She doesn't like me to bump you. It isn't ladylike. But somehow I always seem to have my hands full when I get to you. Now what was I going to the kitchen for?" She peered vaguely across the room at Miss Dora, who was swooping gracefully into the Windsor chair.

"I just saw a flying saucer, Delia." The swoop was marred a little by rheumatism, and a grimace of pain that wiped out some of the complacency of her next remark. "A young man got out."

Miss Delia clucked in exasperation. "Dora, you're always seeing things. Men especially. It's because you never married."

Miss Dora's tiny chin quivered and her vague blue eyes clouded. "You were married only once, and only for a year. And that was fifty years ago. And anyway, you talk to things."

"Just passing remarks," said Miss Delia comfortably, putting the philodendron precariously on the one bare spot on the whatnot. She admired it briefly. "There. You'll look very nice there. And you'll liven things up. Was he a nice-looking young man?"

Dora blinked. Delia was difficult to understand. You never could tell whether she was making a passing remark to a flower pot or really talking to you. The years had not accustomed her to these unmarked splits in Delia's conversational gambits, so it took her a moment to adjust to this one. Perhaps, she thought without too much hope, Delia was really interested this time enough to listen. Only she had so disappointingly little to tell.

"I didn't really see *him*. Just his footsteps."

"Footprints," corrected Delia. Switching a china dog and a conch shell on the third shelf of the whatnot she surveyed the change with mild approval. "You can't *see* footsteps."

"I saw footsteps. In the grass."

"Footprints," said Miss Delia firmly, then paused to consider the two burnt-out electric light bulbs that nestled in

the woven Filipino grass basket like anemic eggs. "Now how did they get there?"

"The young man made them. Coming here."

"How clever!" Miss Delia smiled at the dusty bulbs. "Is he an electrician?"

"I don't think so. He just got out of the flying saucer and started toward the house. Across the lawn."

"Dora!" Miss Delia clicked her teeth in exasperation. "Somebody's coming here? Here?" Her arthritic hands fluttered. "You never tell me these things until too late. Oh, Dear!"

She glanced around the room in hurried appraisal, her voice dying with her rapid calculations. There were some cold scones and a pot of tea she had made for Dora, and a stick of butter. Or had she used the butter for the scones? She couldn't remember, and it made her exasperated.

"The idea!" she said. "Inviting strange young men to the house without telling me!"

Oh, yes, there was a piece of stale cake she had meant to nibble on before going to bed, but hadn't got around to. The cake would do, if you poured a little cooking sherry over it. And Father Dear's bone-handled service and the Sheffield creamer.

She peered out the window. "I don't see any young man. Or footprints, either."

"They weren't footprints, Delia. I keep telling you. They were footsteps. One, two—one, two." Miss Dora stamped her feet in ragged rhythm. "Like that. In the grass. Just—footsteps."

Miss Dora snorted. "Then how do you know it's a young man, if you didn't see him?"

"I'm sensitive." Though the chair was not a rocker Miss Dora swayed herself back and forth with obvious satisfaction.

Behind her the door opened hesitantly. Miss Delia stared at it over her sister's shoulder and her mouth tightened.

"Well, either come in or go out." She marched past Miss Dora and pushed the door closed. "I declare, they don't make houses the way they used to in Father Dear's day," apparently forgetting that Father Dear had built this very house. "The wind just comes in anywhere."

MISS DORA hadn't answered. Not that Delia expected it, but she did wish Dora wouldn't just stare at Father Dear's platform rocker. And just because the antimacassar was rumpled. The one she had crocheted in that snowflake pattern that was so difficult.

Miss Delia altered her course among the cluttered tables to rectify this sacrilege, scolding as she went, "You! The very idea! Father Dear's very own antimacassar that I crocheted myself. Rumpled!"

Before Miss Delia's reaching hand could touch it, the doily smoothed itself out and answered courteously, "I'm sorry. It's just that I'm so—tired."

Miss Delia drew her arm back slowly, cocking her head, peering at the antimacassar. It was unprecedented for the doily to answer her, though she had often scolded it for being rumpled. She peered around at Miss Dora to see how she was taking this deviation. Her sister was leaning coquettishly forward and simpering—yes, simply simpering—at the antimacassar.

"You do look rather tired." Dora turned from the antimacassar, fluttering her eyelashes at Delia. "Couldn't you get the young man some sherry, Delia?" She went back to simpering at Father Dear's chair and the antimacassar. "It must have been quite a trip."

The antimacassar sighed and the whole chair seemed to shiver. "Terrible! Perfectly terrible! And the suspense! Never knowing when they might implode me."

"Dreadful! Simply dreadful!" Dora tore her eyes from the antimacassar and flicked a look at Delia. "Sherry,

Delia. I'm sure our guest would appreciate some of Father Dear's Amontillado."

The chair settled back, sighing. "That sounds delightful, but I'd really prefer some *glupniks*—cold—in *goswort*, if you don't mind."

Miss Delia turned toward the kitchen door muttering under her breath, "*Glupniks*, cold, in *goswort*—*glupniks*, cold in *goswort*." She had reached the swinging door before the meaning, or total lack of it, caught up with her. She swiveled hesitantly. "I'm afraid we don't have any." She flicked an uncertain smile at the antimacassar. "Wouldn't you like some nice sponge cake with sherry sauce?"

"Delia! The sponge cake is stale! And *not* the cooking sherry! Mr.—uh—" Dora stumbled over the name. "Mr.—uh—" She coughed delicately. "I'm so sorry. I'm terrible about names, Mr.—uh. . . ."

"That's right," said the antimacassar with pleased surprise. "So few people get a name right the first time, and it's quite annoying when they forget it. Especially when it's so simple, like mine. It's because I'm just a Fourth Level Entity."

Miss Delia nodded solemn agreement and bumped the kitchen door open with her hip automatically, though she wasn't carrying anything. "Fourth Level Entity. Fourth Level Entity . . . Three helpings of Fourth Level Entity." The slap of the returning door stung her momentarily to reality. She came back into the room. "We haven't forgotten your name because we never knew it, Mr.—uh—"

"But that's it," remarked the chair pleasantly. "Mr. Uhh—with two h's. But how did you know? Are you telepaths? I'm a pretty fair receptor but I don't project at all well, and naturally I'm *no* good at probing. Not a Fourth Level Entity." The voice paused and then asked, a trifle fearfully it seemed to Delia, "Are you Probers?"

Dora's light, almost girlish laughter tinkled out. "We may be old maids but

we're not snoops." And she added, without perceptible pause, "What happened to your flying saucer?"

"I sent it back. Set the controls for automatic return, you know." When Dora nodded as if she understood, the Voice went on, a little stronger. "I never meant to steal it, just borrow it." The Voice sighed. "And I can't go back, anyway. Because of the invasion."

"How thrilling!" Dora trilled with a delicious shiver. "Like a book by . . . Oh, Delia, the sherry! I'm sure this poor dear man needs something. He looks *weary*!"

Delia tilted her little sack-of-meal body toward Dora and whispered tightly, "Can you see him?"

DORA'S laughter lilted gaily. "Of course. He's quite good-looking. In a distinguished sort of way."

"That's very kind of you," said the Voice, preening a little. "It isn't everyone who appreciates oddity. Some of my closest friends find the extra arms a bit disconcerting, but it makes my work so *much* easier."

"Of course," Dora agreed fuzzily.

"Most of my friends are content with the usual four, but I find six so much handier." The Voice chuckled. "Oh, dear! I never realized what a good joke that was. Handi-er. More hands," the Voice explained pedantically, "makes my work so much easier."

Miss Delia put down the conch shell she had been concentrating on and peered unhappily at the chair. "Just what is your work, Mr. Uhh?"

"Research. Fascinating, but slow, until I thought of the extra arms. Now I can hold a book in each pair of hands and get along much faster."

Miss Dora did some faintly audible calculations. "You read three books at once? Three?"

"Of course." The Voice was astounded at such ignorance. "One with each eye."

Miss Delia turned her head politely away while she explored her face with

an agitated forefinger, checking the number and position of her own eyes as if she were afraid someone might have left an extra one around during the night. No such worries troubled Miss Dora.

She chirped gaily, "Father Dear was a great reader," and simpered at the chair. "However, I think he read only one book at a time. But then, he only had two eyes. Like everybody else." Dora looked briefly confused. "I mean, like normal peop—" She flushed under the layer of rice powder. "I mean, like people *here*."

"Then you—know?" The Voice from the platform rocker sighed, almost, it seemed, with relief.

Miss Dora made a charmingly deprecating gesture and a fleeting smile. "I'm sensitive."

"But you're *not* a Prober?" the Voice asked plaintively and sighed again. "It would be just my luck to run into a Prober, after all the trouble I took to get here."

"Why did you?" Miss Delia asked it with the bland directness of a child. "Especially if it was so much trouble."

"Delia! Mr. Uhh is a guest!" After this sisterly admonition she glanced at the empty chair with her first trace of uncertainty. "Sort of," she added. "And you don't ask guests why they came." With more assurance she beamed at the chair. "We're delighted to have you. You don't have to tell us a thing."

"But," and the Voice sounded mildly puzzled, "that's why I came here. To tell you why I came here. I mean—oh, dear. I'm not very good at this. I came to warn you."

"Warn us?" Miss Delia and Miss Dora sat up straight and then peered behind their respective chairs. Miss Delia even bent low enough to peep under the table, and the dust she saw there scandalized her. Over her plump shoulder she clucked at Dora.

"You didn't clean yesterday and it was your day," she accused. "You leave everything for . . . Oh, excuse me. You

were just going to warn us. What about? Not the taxes again? I'm sure I paid this year's."

"Oh, Delia, you didn't forget? Not again. And after all poor Mr. Whortle said about last—"

"It's not about taxes," the Voice interrupted peevishly. "It's about the invasion." The Voice managed to sound both provoked and sepulchral.

"Oh!" Both ladies relaxed visibly.

"We know about that," Miss Dora said gaily. "Atom bombs and things. Atom bombs! Ridiculous, trying to make out they're something new when everybody knows even the old-fashioned kind blew you to atoms."

"That isn't what they mean by atom bombs," explained the Voice eagerly, as if it enjoyed explaining things. "It's because the bombs are made of—" Apparently the Voice saw Miss Delia's blank, unresponsive face for it slowed to a stop, took a deep breath and started again. "About the invasion—"

"Communists!" hissed Miss Dora.

MISS DELIA sniffed determinedly. "You can't tell us anything about those horrid creatures."

"I'm not trying to!" the Voice almost wailed. "It's my—friends. They're the ones planning the invasion. In fact, it has already started. Many, many of them are already here."

Miss Delia sat up primly. "Aren't you being a tattle-tale?"

The Voice hesitated, abashed. "I suppose I am. In a way, I'm a traitor. But I can't help it. I feel so sorry for you."

Miss Delia glanced at Miss Dora in astonishment, and then at the antimacassar. "Sorry for *us*? But we're quite happy. Really we are." Miss Delia managed to be quite firm.

"Oh, I don't mean you two, especially. All Earthlings. I read so much about them in Research. We have a complete file in my Division." It announced this proudly. "I made it my project and I got to like Earthlings. They're so—naive. So primitive and—er—elemen-

tal. They have emotions." The Voice seemed to lean confidentially toward them. "They even have—sex."

"It's vastly over-rated," Miss Dora proclaimed, her mouth pursing.

"Dora is an old maid," Miss Delia explained smugly, but the smugness got lost in a retrospect that went back fifty years, until she was looking wistful. "But I think you've got something."

"Earthlings," expounded the Voice, "should be allowed to work out their own destiny. That's why I feel the invasion is wrong." The Voice was warming up, talking somewhat like Dr. Horace Conover in one of his more emphatic sermons on Donations to the Building Fund. "So when I came across the Master Plan, I was horrified. Of course, properly it shouldn't have been filed in my Division." The Voice told them this conspiratorially. "But I think it was Fate. I had read about that in the Earthlings' files, too."

"Reading gives me a headache—too much, I mean," Miss Delia explained, then added thoughtfully, "Even one book at a time."

Miss Dora hitched forward, bugging her pale eyes at the rocker. "You make it sound exciting. About the Master Plan, I mean. I remember in E. Philips Oppenheim, once, a sultry Eurasian girl—"

"In E. Philips Oppenheim," Miss Delia cut in, "all Eurasian girls are sultry."

"They plan to take over," said the Voice ominously, and seemed to sit back for reactions.

"The Eurasians?" Miss Delia and Miss Dora asked together from the romantic depths of remembered Oppenheim.

"Not Eurasians—my people," corrected the Voice, a trifle nettled. "It's all in the Master Plan, and it's pretty horrible, because my people have no emotions. They are ruthless. Completely ruthless."

Miss Dora shivered her best Oppenheim shiver, while Miss Delia settled

one hip against the door frame to listen comfortably until she could remember just what she was going to the kitchen for.

"Ruthless. Cold. Implacable. They have already begun the horrible process of invasion. With cold, deliberate malice they have begun to take over. Already thousands of them have arrived." The Voice stated this ominously and paused for a reply.

Miss Delia eased herself off the door frame, which was cutting into a fleshy hip, and flicked an uncertain smile at the chair. "Well, thank you for telling us. And how would you like your tea? With lemon or cream?"

"But aren't you going to do something?" asked the Voice rather quaveringly and then, with what might have been a peevish shrug, added, "I can't drink tea."

"What a pity!" Miss Dora sighed. "There's nothing like a nice cup of tea to settle your nerves."

"It's refreshing," Miss Delia contributed. "Especially after a tiring trip." She reached for a cup and saucer on the overloaded whatnot and knocked over a wooden Quan Yin, a memento of Father Dear's daring excursion into Chinatown in 1902. "Naughty. You're very naughty."

She set the imperturbable godlet back on his splay feet and peered hopefully through the bewildering array of bric-a-brac, ticking off the satisfying realities, including the two burnt-out light bulbs, before she turned back to the disturbing vacantness in and around the platform rocker.

"Couldn't you make yourself just a little bit visible?"

SHE blinked plaintively, leaning her plump little figure well forward as if she wanted to catch the least last whisper of the Voice before it, too, was indiscernible.

"I'm afraid I can't," the Voice apologized. "Not till I symbiote."

"Naturally." Miss Dora's scorn for

her sisters ignorance was marred slightly by her own puzzled archness aimed at the chair. "What's symbiote?"

The Voice seemed to hesitate, as if groping for an explanation. "It's—well, it's combining."

As if settling down for one of the longer television shows, Miss Delia sidled crabwise back to her chair. "Then combine." If there was a childlike dare in her tone the Voice failed to catch it.

"Oh, I couldn't!" The Voice sounded truly distressed. "It's quite cruel." The Voice sighed. "But then my people are cruel. I don't think they mean to be, but they are. It's because they have no emotions. They calculate. Cold and logical—and cruel. You see, in order to symbiote, one of my people has to find an Earthling ready to die."

"Nobody's ever ready to die." Miss Delia settled that one quickly.

"I mean, *about* to die. Preferably from something not too disagreeable, like being mangled. Being mangled makes it difficult to straighten things out inside, once you've—" the Voice coughed politely—"assisted the Earthling out. And of course a really dead one is no good at all. You have to catch one just right. Just on the verge, you might say. It's all in the instruction booklet my people prepared for the invasion."

"Delia almost died six months ago," Dora offered brightly.

"But that's not now," Miss Delia added hastily. "And besides, Dora, you were quite ill a week or so later. From eating those crabs."

"You didn't tell me they'd been there three days," Miss Dora began huffily, then let her voice die to the tiredness of an old argument long since lost. She sighed. "I might have died."

"They were for bait," Miss Delia said vaguely.

"Anyway," Miss Dora smiled with arch brightness, "it was weeks ago, and I'm sure Mr. Uhh isn't interested. And besides, you know I love crabs. You

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might have warned me. Your own sister." The words were an accusation, but the tone was gentle forgiveness, a exhalation of martyrdom. "You always were careless."

"Now there," said the Voice excitedly, "is just the sort of thing I mean. An ideal situation for one of my people to symbiote. Someone is quite ill. You just—move in."

"Wouldn't it get rather crowded?" Miss Delia glanced down at her own dumpy little figure. "And wouldn't it show? Like twins?"

"Not at all. Not at all. Though it is difficult to explain an Earthling. It's like—well, moving one tenant out of a house and moving another one in."

"Wouldn't people notice? I mean, I knew when we got new tenants next door. They weren't the same at all." Miss Delia nodded firmly.

"Not the way my people do it. They just move out the Earthling and take over. Same voice, same habits, same movements. In fact, they become the Earthling."

"If there's no difference," said Miss Delia with a rare flash of logic, "then what's the point of all the bother?"

"But then my people have bodies. They have become Earthlings! And each new symbiote can help others to come through. You see, at the start, six months or so ago, it wasn't easy for my people to find an Earthling about to die. But now, with so many of them here, as Earthlings, they can help others to find suitable bodies, or arrange for them."

"Dear me! Arrange for them?" Miss Dora glanced apprehensively at Miss Delia. "Is he saying what I think he's saying?"

"It sounds like murder," Miss Delia said, pursing her thin lips. "And I can't say I approve of murder. Outside of books, that is." She turned to the chair. "Are you sure you mean murder?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. It's murder for the Earthling, but it's a kind of birth for one of my people.

That way my people get flesh and blood bodies. You can't understand how important that is to them. You see, my people are just Entities. They just *are*. And our planet is bleak, dreadfully bleak. So naturally they want a place with sun and warmth, and bodies to feel the warmth and to have emotions."

"Emotions," Miss Dora murmured, "are delightful."

"That is not the attitude for a spinster," Miss Delia chided.

THE VOICE had learned. It ignored the side remarks and continued, "But I like Earthlings, so I've come to warn them. To help them. Because if it isn't stopped *now* my people will gradually take over. Why, I've seen the record of one of my people who got hold of the body of an Earthling doctor. He's been tremendously successful in locating prospects and helping his friends to symbiote. Gets the credit for some remarkable cures too—only the 'cures' are no longer Earthlings."

"You'd never think of a doctor, would you?" Miss Dora remarked, with a sigh. "Doctors are so respectable."

"It doesn't take a doctor, though they have the best opportunities. Any symbiote can do it. An overdose of medicine, bad food, a short circuit, a bathtub accident, a germ or two—"

"I'm sure I shouldn't recognize a germ," Miss Dora giggled from behind her handkerchief.

"They're in dust," Miss Delia said, glancing significantly under the center table.

"Or even an over-supply of alcohol. However, there are specific warning against it in the instruction booklet each of my people brings along. Several of them have symbioted with a definite taste for alcohol. They wind up drunkards."

"They must fight it. Alcohol is an evil! Father Dear said—"

The Voice cut across Miss Dora's interpretation of Father Dear's theories on alcohol, rather peremptorily, she

thought. "It can't be helped. When one of my people symbiotes, he must accept the body he gets, with its age, habits, tastes, capabilities—and limitations. He is the Earthling, no matter how difficult the—er—body may be. Several of the early ones, six months or so back, picked epileptics, and others have taken over Earthlings with cancer and died anyway. And many of these early invaders picked old people, since they were so much easier to—er—handle. But they're learning all the time. And they get more dangerous, because each new one is ready to—ahem—murder another Earthling, even his own brother, to let another of my people symbiote. They're utterly ruthless, I tell you. So we've got to stop them."

"Oh, dear!" Miss Dora, who disliked action of any sort, almost whispered, "Why?"

"Because soon, very soon, they'll start to come through by the millions—by billions—and turn on true Earthlings. Turn brother against brother, sister against sister, father against child, and kill them so my people can come through."

Miss Delia, who at times could be quite logical, scowled at the whatnot, then back at the chair. "Wouldn't they be killing each other? I mean, if they look and act just like us?"

"Ah!" The Voice grew conspiratorial again. "They know each other."

"Really?" Miss Dora stared wide-eyed at the seemingly vacant chair. "How clever! How do they do it?"

"They have a secret grip."

"Like Father Dear's lodge!" Miss Dora got quite excited. "It was very secret. You locked little fingers and—"

By this time, the Voice seemed to have caught on. To forestall Miss Dora it went on hastily:

"This is a little different. It's a secret and special sign they make. Very special. Very secret. By now most of my people probably know each other. Except the new ones, of course. And

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there's always a symbiote to show them around, and to vouch for them."

"So at the invasion they'll only kill real Earthlings! And not each other." Miss Dora produced this wisdom with a note of surprise in her voice.

"Not quite kill them. Just somewhat. Enough for my people to—er—finish the job by symbioting."

Miss Delia who seemed, briefly, at least, quite lucid, blinked thoughtfully. "Do you know them? The—er—symbioted ones?"

The Voice sighed. "No. I can't tell a Symbiote from a genuine Earthling. A Prober might, telepathically, but I can't."

"Then how will you get rid of the Symbiotes? They'd object, I should think, if you just walked up and shot them." Miss Delia aimed a menacing finger and sprayed an imaginary crowd. "And it would take lots of time. If there are as many as you say, I mean."

NOW the Voice was definitely conspiratorial. "I have a way." The tone sank deeper. "Poison!"

"Poison!" Miss Delia lowered her finger abruptly. "I won't have them in the house. I've told Dora. Not even for mice."

"This poison kills only Symbiotes."

"Oh!" Miss Delia scowled childishly. "I still don't think I approve. Besides it would be difficult to get all those—er—Symbiotes to stand still long enough to poison them."

"Not if you put it in the water supply, said the Voice craftily. "A few drops here, a few in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and—*poof!* The invasion is over. My darling Earthlings will be safe."

"You make it sound simple," Miss Dora simpered coyly at the chair, "But can you put it in? You don't look—ahemmmm—very robust."

"He doesn't *look* at all, Dora. At least I can't see him." Miss Delia made this sound like both an affront and a complaint.

"I'm quite strong," said the Voice with a touch of injured vanity. "For a sedentary—er—person, I'm quite strong. And I have enough supplies. I just need your help in pointing out the water supply. We don't use water where I come from, so I might not recognize a pumping station."

"But—" Miss Delia pointed vaguely to the floor around the chair—"those poisons might kill all those Symbiotes, but what about your people who are still—well, invisible, waiting for a suitable Earthling? Couldn't they just come through, later? And start the whole thing over again?"

"That's why I've appealed to you. You could enlist other Earthlings to help. A simple implosion will get rid of any of my people in—well, in my state."

"Implosion?" Miss Dora looked positively roguish, fluffing at her plaid hair. "Please explain. It's nice to have a man around to explain things."

"Well," the Voice went on a trifle smugly, "an implosion is—ahem—it's when . . . Well, take an electric light bulb. There's a vacuum inside. When you break the bulb, air rushes in. That's an implosion. A vacuum cleaner is another form of it. I know, because there are specific warnings against electric light bulbs and vacuum cleaners in the instruction booklets."

Miss Delia giggled. "Electric light bulbs! Vacuum cleaners! Why, we use them all the time." She stood up. "The vacuum cleaner is right in the kitchen."

"Don't!" the voice said hastily. "They aren't dangerous to you, nor to completed Symbiotes. But when you're in *my* state—"

"You do look a little peaked," Miss Dora seemed to consider the space around the platform rocker. "Maybe we should try to build you up a bit before you try to wipe out the Symbiotes. It sounds like quite a task."

"It is," said the Voice and went on bravely, "but I must protect my Earthlings."

"But"—Miss Dora made a wavering

gesture with the handkerchief—"you'll be killing your own people."

"I know, I know." The Voice sounded sorrowful, then strengthened with determination. "But I've told you, they're cold, ruthless, unthinkingly brutal. They should have stayed on our own planet, but they got greedy. Now it's kill, or be killed!"

Miss Delia, who had paused to listen, moved on toward the kitchen. She reversed herself at the door, starting through it rump first, when her eyes lit on the whatnot.

She whinnied almost gaily, "And as for old electric light bulbs, there's simply nothing dangerous about *them*." She stopped in midswing and rocked toward the whatnot. "Just look at them." She reached among the bric-a-brac and picked up the two dusty bulbs, upsetting the Quan Yin again and straightening him absently, holding the two bulbs in her open hand.

"No!" the Voice squealed in terror. "Be careful! Don't drop those."

Miss Delia leaped in startled indignation. The bulbs flew out of her hand, bursting with loud pops.

"Eeeeeee!"

THE Voice shrieked to an impossible crescendo and skirled off into nothingness. The platform rocker swayed forward, and then dropped back. There was a thud, light, almost imperceptible.

Miss Delia peered at a vague outline on the nap of the carpet. "Oh, dear, now I'll have to get the vacuum cleaner."

Miss Dora bounced from her chair,

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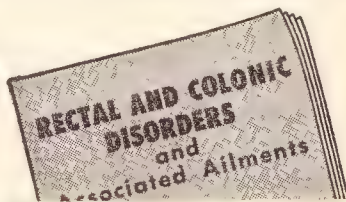
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lavendar handkerchief pressed tight against her mouth, her eyes wide in horror, fixed on the floor just in front of the platform rocker.

"He's dead! Oh, Delia! And he was such a nice young man. So earnest. So serious."

Delia held out both arms and Dora crept into them, whimpering, "Such a nice young man."

"I know. I know, Dora. But it had to be done."

Dora sniffled, backing off. "Of course. It had to be done."

The two sisters clasped hands in a secret and very special grip.

Miss Dora smiled sweetly, forgivingly. "I don't even mind about the crabs any more. You were perfectly right." She gave one last look at the floor beside the rocker. "You'd better get the vacuum cleaner. That will dispose of the poison, too. If I remember our instruction booklets correctly."

THE READER SPEAKS

(Continued from page 8)

him and kick 'em around, and there ain't nothin' there no more. What he writes comes out stale, a mere rehash of what he's already written.

And s-f stories can't be molded into a formula you can use for dozens of writers to bang out story after story. You know darn' well the western and detective fields got their boost up to general popularity that way, back in the prehistoric ages. Back in the boom of the 30's, the s-f mags tried it with the old thud-and-blunder formula and it didn't work; that boom fizzled, too. Science-fiction just covers too much ground to lend itself readily to any formula.

If we're ever going to build the s-f field up to anything like the western and detective fields, it'll have to be done differently. Seems to me it'll have to be done slowly and gradually, with a long series of minor booms and recessions, persistently and insidiously creeping into the public's minds as time goes by. I think that, as a branch of literature, it has something good to contribute to our technological civilization, perhaps comparable to the tolerance Sophism managed to generate in the Greek civilization. Science-fiction embodies a considerable tolerance and preference for free-wheeling ideas, too. But we still live in a generation that felt the bottom had dropped out of their world when the A-bomb was announced. This is not a generation that will take readily to World-wrecker Hamiltons. They're a little too emotional about it, just yet.—24 Kensington Ave., Jersey City, N. J.

We couldn't print all of your letter, Joe, or we'd have ended up with the featured story on the cover. However, I like your point about what s-f can contribute to the literature of our time. Wherever free-wheeling imagination is encouraged, the possibilities are infinite.

HE RIPS WITH VIP

by John Courtois

Sam! Whooshie birthday and other droll beatings. TWS is older than I am. A pulp is old

enough to go into cabarets and other dispensaries legal-like and I'm not. Three more years I have to wait, but I'm thirsty now. I'll be out to your little eastern community next year, so you better keep a bottle in our office.

Needless to say, McMines, I wore out those three teeth chewing up fans. I'm proud of them. In fact, when they came out, I placed them on the shelf of family mementoes, (only ten) between my bronzed baby shoes and Jean's first brassiere. By the blue-eyed bye, did I tell you that Jean died? It was very tragic. The park commission made her (stop panting, son, there isn't a period in sight) turn in her red light and she just pined away. There is a brighter side to the story, though. She was delicious.

Did you flunk biology when you were a school boy? You seem to gobble up these short novels about reproduction. *You mean you're first finding out?* I can hear all the women on the block now. "Gertrude, did you hear the news? Mrs. Mines' little boy has grown up! Why I remember only yesterday when he used to sit on the front steps, playing with his heads." Be frank, Sam. No, no, the other head. That's better.

A question for Richardson: Why would anyone want a magnetic field? If I found one, I'd throw it away.

And now for the meat of the mag, Finlay's women. (Nyaaaaa. That to you, Clarke). As long as you're already stuck with one Virgil, how about getting something by Virgil Parth. Ole Vip the Vipper is the original little green man. You go Pogo? Man, I RIP WITH VIP.

Rev. Moorhead (and less sternness) you should complain. This Mines character cuts out all my ribald observations on religion and window peekers. By Gad, Sir Yours (I don't want anything to do with him), one of these days you'll go too far. You hear me? T-o-o far, and then, Sir, I shall steal your shadow. I can see why your readers might be offended by my comparing communism to the Catholic Church, but what in the newt's eye was wrong with my plans for a window peeper's union?

Bobby Arentz, tis dangerous to call any group of people debauched. The original founders of

your Salt Lake City were considered by many to be children of the devil. Mormons? Let's drive them out of town. They won't live by our moral standards. You see, it is always *our* standards that are right and righteous, and *theirs* that are sinful. Personally, I have no morals, don't believe in them. Religion is for the weak; morals for the stupid.

McMines, tis a good thing O'Maxwell didn't begin his letter "Dear Sham." Man, I'd have rocked. Sure now, and me mither was an O'Holleran. Her mither was a Wolfe. And of course, me father (or a reasonable facsimile) was a Courtois. This makes me international. I can drink whiskey, beer, or wine and still claim I'm maintaining the family tradition. I even have an excuse for getting high. One of my French ancestors was hanged as a pirate. No kidding.

Jan Sadler, if you're anything like I was when I was fourteen (you didn't sound like it) the world would be a better place without you. Man, was I ever a prig. Those were the wasted years, unless you consider having read the complete works of Al. P. Terhune something to be proud of. Man, I didn't wake up and look around me until I was out of school.

Ogoggggggggggg. A dog just bit my wooden leg! Hoping you are the same:—318 East Commercial Street, Appleton, Wisconsin.

Nope, Sam's not the same. There's more of him now, because he doesn't have to worry over making your letter printable. He sends his condolence about Jean and his congratulations to the dog. How do you know? Maybe that dog was Sam on his way to Massachusetts.

ON OPINIONS

by Norman J. Clarke

Dear Sam: My ego greatly bloated by the fact that I successfully answered all questions in the quiz (although I must confess that I guessed the correct matchings of *suidae* and *columbidae*) I dare write you with my foggy-lettered typewriter. Because the Summer issue of TWS was labelled "Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Issue," I kind of expected that maybe a paper flower or a party hat would pop out when the pages were flipped open. But no. We never have any fun, we people who continually fall off our porches. (Thank you, Gene Sheppard.)

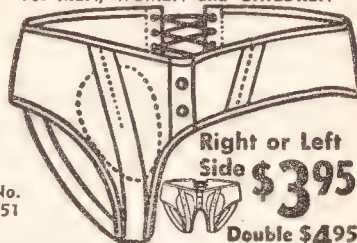
This will be a short, concise and I hope, cogent reply to the bitter missive which appeared under the name of one Jan Sadler, and which you, Sam, shied away from in a cowardly fashion, meanwhile directing me to answer him. Master Sadler, I am not averse to a twelve-year old having opinions and expressing them. Why, I can remember *often* having an opinion when I was twelve years old. Since then I haven't been twelve years old. But the twelve- (or fourteen-) year-old who cheers for larger and nuder women on magazine covers is not expressing an opinion. He is reflecting a state of mind. There is plenty of time for life, lechery and the pursuit of shapeliness a little later on in life.

[Turn page]

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Indeed, it often appears that there is time for little else. And, Master Sadler, all my grandchildren—non of whom is over six years of age—are learning to detect the difference between Crossen stories and humor, how to hold pens between their toes (in order that they might write for fanzines) and how to develop invulnerability to the Pectoral Flood which seems to inundate the world. They are developing under my constant supervision, and they intend someday to be the founding fathers of Twelfth Fandom.

So, Master Sadler, you go and think up a few good opinions . . . then wait around a couple of years and see if you still hold them. If you do, let us know, hmmm?

And all that is left to say is: I am as disappointed in the mildness of Reverend Moorehead as he is disappointed with the mildness of the letter column. There was a time when the Rev. could, and did, inspire me to belch smoke and fire . . . but I guess we all get tired after a while, hey, Reverend? Yes, yes, sooner or later we all start to feel sane, and that is the beginning of the endurance.

Maybe these here, now, hydrogen bombs make us all lethargic. I tell you, we gotta watch out for all them little Geigers running around, waiting to be counted. They're pretty funny things. Pretty odd, too.

And, thus leaving myself wide open, I close.—
411 Mayfair Avenue, Ottawa, Ont., Canada.

It seems like everybody has a reaction to Rev. Moorhead. He drives some people to hydrophobia, and others he makes sane. If he doesn't win friends, he influences people. Right now he's got Clarke leading with his chin. Are you sure, Norman, that the hydrogen bomb is causing your lethargy?

THE RETURN OF DEECK

by William Deeck

Dear Mr. Mines: After much fasting and cogitation, I have found out the one sure way of getting a letter in TWS: Just say that you are a teen-ager and say that you dislike all the adults who make disparaging remarks about your and others' intelligence (that fourteen year old kid got his letter included in TRS didn't he?)—so consider it said! But to tell the truth—I always do; it's one of my failings—I am not one of the aforementioned group. I am only seven and a half. I have been reading sf for six years.

Norman J. Clarke: You are an intellectual? Extraordinary statement to make after writing that letter! I am sure that you just misconstrued the symptoms. I suggest a purgative. Oh, that's all right; there's no charge.

Mr. Mines, I'm ashamed of you! Just because somebody comes along with an appellation—the Rev. C. M. Moorhead, to name names—you have to put him in TRS. And, to make matters worse, you let him go blithering about saying TEV in SS was mild in the Spring issue. Naturally it was mild—there was nothing of Deeck in it. What is TEV without Deeck? Nothing but ignorami spouting their likes, dislikes, and ill-

nesses. But did you mention my name? Did you tell him of my wonderful letters which have all the fans bowing to me? You did not! While you were meandering through the letter columns, did you happen to think of the new star bursting on the horizon (me) who is destined to change sf and all the fans? . . . Let's not get sickening and ask whether that's a threat or a promise. You did not think! You have let Rev. continue to go doddering about with no hope for the future; I hope he hates you for it.

What's all the argument on birth control? There's no use discussing it; people either will or won't have kids. The lower classes can't be stopped from breeding (they have the mistaken idea that if they have ten or twelve they can advance in this world) and the higher classes are too busy to bother about such mundane things.—*8400 Potomac Avenue College Park, Maryland.*

Deeck signs his letter "innocently yours," so I assume he's a member of the higher classes and is too busy to bother with mundane things. I'm glad to know that reading TWS isn't mundane. However, I find we have a reader who hasn't been spending all her time reading TWS:

THE LADY SPEAKS HER MIND

by Rita Whitney

Dear Editor: Spring, '54 was pretty heavy with women writers, so maybe I don't have a chance. I missed the Dec. issue, because I was having a baby about then and didn't know anyone was thinking of cutting down T.W.S. This is the only Magazine in sf. that my husband will read, and while he is looking for it on the stands I can collect my usual half-dozen. A low-blow.

So I missed the original debate. But here I come anyway.

I don't believe in the "bundles from heaven" even if they are the nicest things that can happen to a woman. It's a nice thought, but I doubt that the higher up thinks any more of my little baby than he does of my Mama cat's, I certainly do. You can't squirm out of adult responsibility that easy, Judy.

Read something once that Man was the only animal who ate when he was not hungry and made love in every season, or something close to that. Which is one way of saying he's a darn fool, and who doesn't know that. So we stockpile wheat and produce more children than there is an apparent need of to keep the race kicking. I say apparent.

You over-look something. Man may be a fool, but Ma nature rarely is. Colonization of the solar system impractical, Richard? Ha! We sat contentedly in thirteen colonies until a few fools broke trail because they were the kind to wonder what was over the hill. There will be enough fools in our top-heavy population to ding away at every corner of the possibility of looking over the mountains of the moon, too. They will leave their foolish corpses all over the way from here to there, but there will be eager newcomers ready

to step up and take their chance. And we will make it. And we will find something challenging us to be built or grown there too.

Isn't it obvious that you are not going to find any way to use real, regimented birth control? Hasn't it sunk thru your peaked little heads that the very primitiveness that drives you males mad is the one stumbling block that no one, or no government will overcome? Say she can't, and a woman would go to any lengths to become pregnant and hide in the hills if she had to. No Government has issued a decree forbidding pregnancy yet, but you fellows would witness an explosion that would put the hell-bomb to shame if it were done. That is the only thing that would make us otherwise than the pacifists we are by nature.

And I might as well jump into that. When one woman insults another does she poke her in the nose? Well, not usually. A man? Usually. For every female that lustily yells "kill the bum" at the fights there are hundreds that cringe at being included in the same sex. We have gotten where we are by cunning, out-talking the male, and knowing when to yell "Uncle" when he is not intimidated by either of the first. And by now, it is instinctive for a woman to know that she can get what she wants a lot easier, her way, than a man can get, his way. We'd carry that right into government. We'd finagle for months over a point, without getting up and walking out on a conference, and since we have had to compromise for centuries between what we want and what we can get by physical force, we'd find it perfectly natural to do so at the conference table.

But we'd also think a lot of status quo, and we would smother anything that threatened it. We get into and keep the world in a lovely, gilded rut. We never like the way a man charges forward, but we love his achievements. We'd never charge forward, and we would never achieve anything either. Only the masculine women ever achieve anything except a good man and a flexible figure.

Women scream that they don't have time because they are raising kids. Tut, tut, girls. A man will work eight hours a day and come home and figure out a new gadget or write the all-American novel page at a time.

A woman sometimes has the ambition and tries that novel too. What comes out? Drivel. Sometimes high-class drivel, I'll admit, but still unadulterated drivel.

By the way ask Richard sometime who thought adultery was strictly a masculine occupation—or avocation? I thought that idea got lost somewhere back in the Victorian age. Men and women cheat for the same reasons, and before that they are just lookin'. The moralists would apparently have us leave the most important step in life to luck. I'd say they deserve what they get, and what probably makes them moralists.

But do intelligent people even consider buying that pig in a poke?

I don't think so. I think Tom is deceived by all
[Turn page]

ANSWERS TO QUIZ ON PAGE 56

1-c, 2-g, 3-i, 4-j, 5-h, 6-b, 7-e, 8-a, 9-f, 10-d.

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the loose lip service floating around. Believe me, that is all there is left to the moral code, or at least the part he is referring to. Ethics are just the moral code grown up. It can be stretched or limited any way you choose. If you are vitally concerned with Ethics you are just fighting the same battle with different words. You get a nice feeling that you are considering the whole thing in an adult way, but it is no substitute for growing up and stop worrying about it.

Anyway, here's for babies, and what get them here, and "on to the moon" with the rest of the fools.

Get T.W.S. back on the old schedule, huh? And more like the "Naked Eye!" It's the truth that social mores could produce a child ashamed of a tree. Sillier things are present in our own culture.—*Rt. 2, Box 349-F, Salem, Oregon.*

Congratulations: It's always reassuring to hear that the s-f fans are multiplying. The need for a strong fandom is the best argument I know for having a baby. Is anyone else expecting?

FROM THE ARGENTINE

by Richard Albert Ertl

Dear Editor: I just finished reading your winter issue 1953 of "THRILLING WONDER Stories" and am completely satisfied. It's just the type of stf mag. I like. It is a pity that I can't get those magazines here, so I beg you, please, put me in contact with some science-fiction fan who'd like to send me American magazines. I can give some Argentinian stf mags. I am 17 years old and I'm studying at the secondary school. One of my favorite hobbies is to collect science-fiction magazines from almost the whole world. (Well, I have a little collection of Argentinian, Spanish, French and American stf books.) If you publish this letter, please notice that I answer ALL the letters. I like too to maintain serious correspondence.—*Rioja 470 St., Posadas—MISIONES ARGENTINA.*

We've received congratulations on our anniversary issue from a number of readers, including W. C. Brandt, 1725 N. Seminary Avenue, Oakland 21, Calif., and Dick Clarkson, 410 Kensington Road, Baltimore 29 Maryland. The latter hopes we've got twenty-five more years in us. More than that, Dick.

George O'Connor, 419 Fifth Avenue, Watervliet, N. Y., sends a picture of a two-headed editor putting letters alternately into a printing press and a wastebasket. It's a remarkable likeness.

Mrs. Lewis M. Oaks, Jr., 413. 37th Street, Sioux City, Iowa writes that she's married a fan. She used to be Marian Cox, and she's already talking about fanlets.

J. Martin Graetz, Box 5541, 420 Memorial Drive, Cambridge 39, Mass., says, "HELIX

is one of the best Sturgeons I've read. Seems he's getting out of his transition period when just about every story had to contain some sex crime."

Lionel Stern, 1728 Donwell Drive, South Euclid 21, Ohio, corrects Sturgeon's biological terminology. He points out that arthropoda is a phylum containing (among others) insects, so that it's perfectly all right to refer to insects as arthropods.

Joy K. Goodwin, 66 West Valley Road, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire, England, would like to swap copies of the British magazine *Authentic* for copies of American magazines. And while we're amongst readers in other countries, Jan Jansen, Berchemlei 229, Bergerhout, Belgium, would like to get in touch with other fans in Belgium. Also, can anybody supply him with a copy of THE LOVERS by Farmer? He's running a fan magazine, ALPHA—six issues per year printed in English. You can subscribe for \$.60 per year. Ken Potts, 307 Douglas Parade, Newport, Melbourne, Australia, wonders how he can get an original cover or inside artwork. 'Taint possible, though, unless you go to a fan convention. They're sometimes given for auction at the conventions.

Bob Farnham, 204 Mountain View Drive, Delton, Georgia, objects to the racial angle in ONE MORE CHANCE, on the grounds that it might be interpreted as approving prejudice. However, the author and everybody here thought that the story's effect was exactly the opposite—at any rate, the story's intention was certainly not in the direction to which Farnham objects.

Gary Labowitz, 7234 Baltimore, Kansas City 14, Missouri, is still looking for someone who wants to trade magazines. Let's see, I probably have a few old ones myself . . .

Richard Harter, Highmore, S. Dakota, would like to play correspondence chess with somebody. He also agrees to argue politics endlessly if he's encouraged. Robert E. Lombard, 68 Pleasant Street, Ludlow, Vermont, thinks the Summer issue of TWS was superior, but he urges Jan Sadler "and young folks like him" to try a variety of literature. It will make the science fiction seem better he says.

And Bob Arentz carries on at Box 2278, Salt Lake City, Nevada, still in the midst of cultural speculation. He continues to have hope for the U.S.A. (no cultural destruction in sight!) and I incline to agree with him. That's all 'til next time.

—The Editor.



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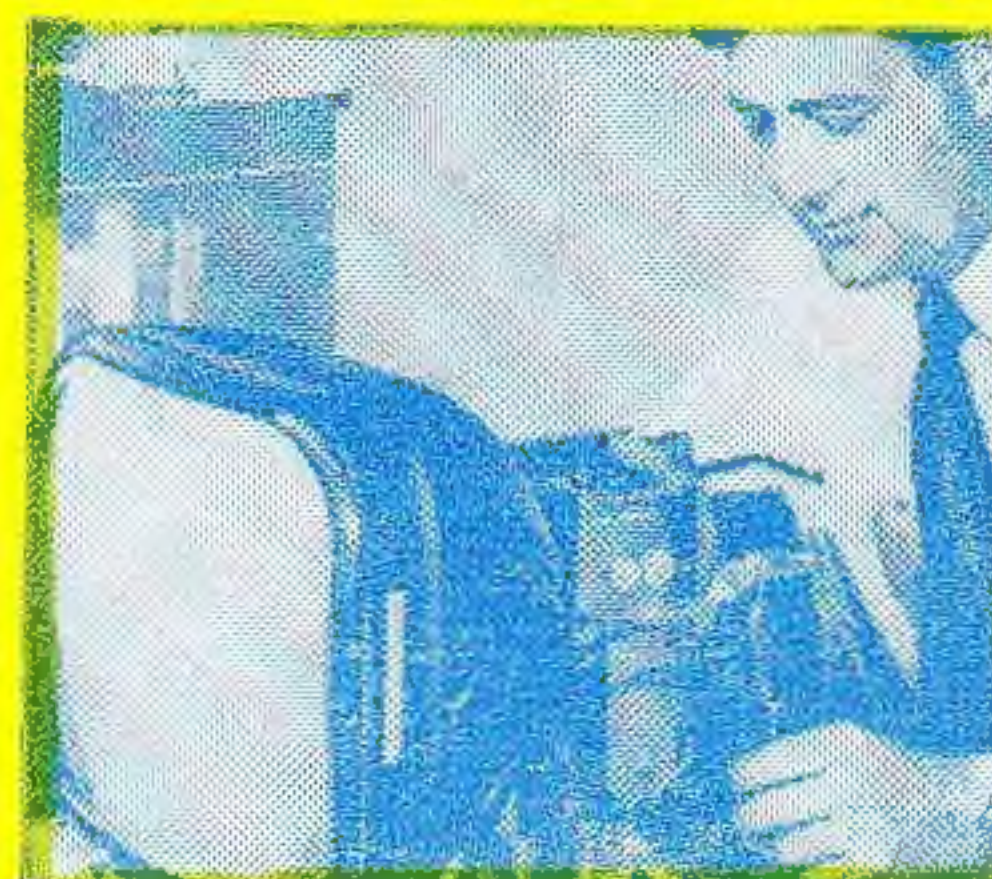
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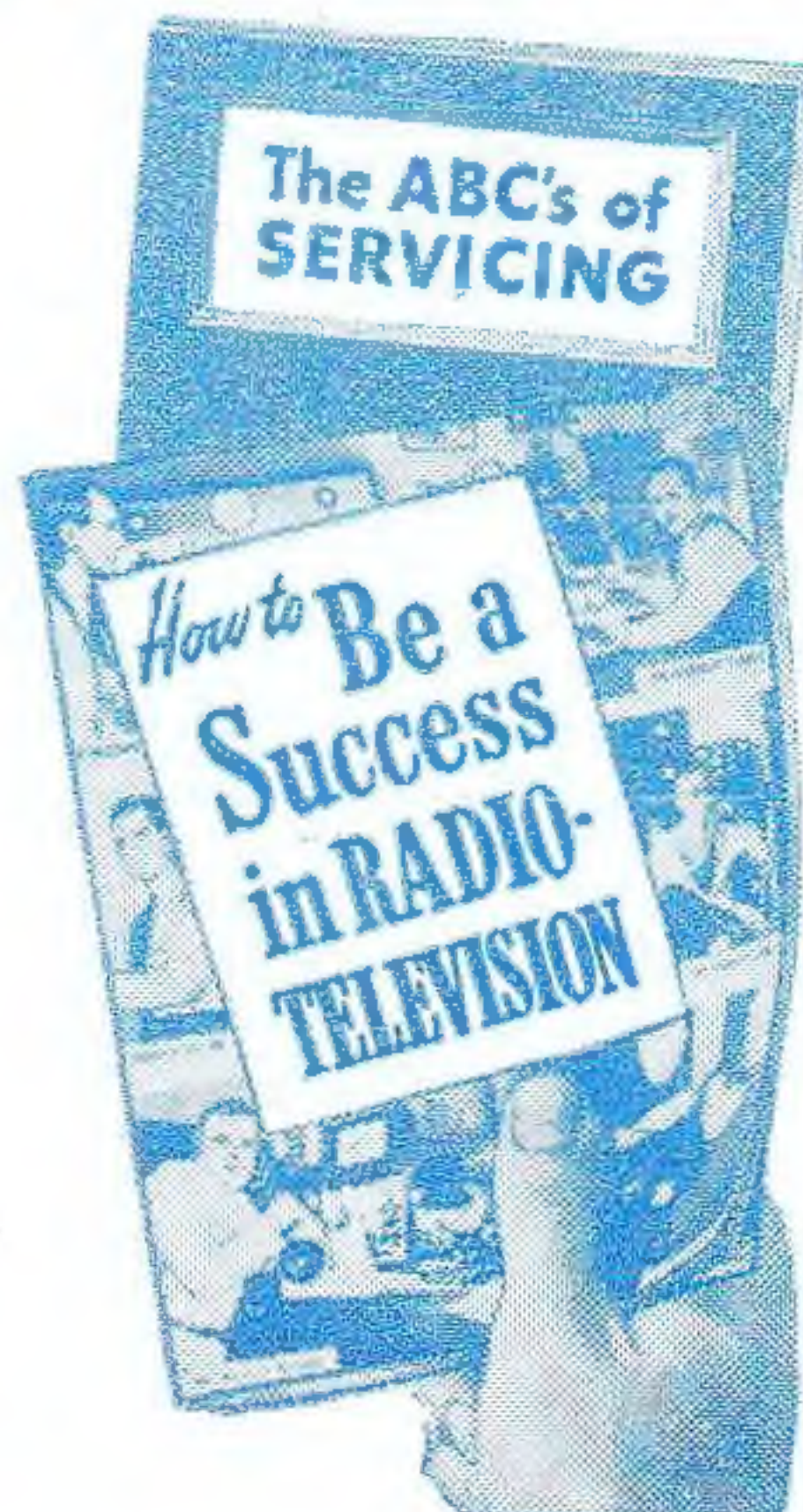
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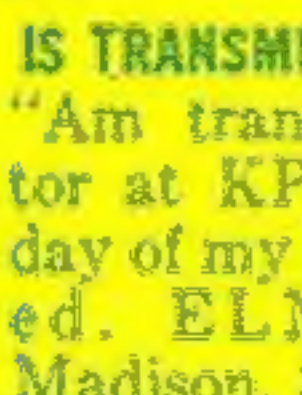
VETS WRITE IN DATE OF DISCHARGE _____



I TRAINED THESE MEN FOR GOOD PAY JOBS



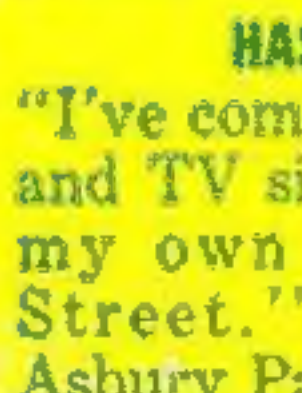
EARN \$10 TO \$15 A WEEK EXTRA
"Started repairing Radios six months after enrolling. Earned \$10 to \$15 a week, spare time." ADAM KRAMLIK, Jr., Sumner, Pa.



IS TRANSMITTER-STUDIO OPERATOR
"Am transmitter-studio operator at KPAT. Most important day of my life was when I enrolled." ELMER FREWALT, Madison, S. Dakota.



HANDLES TOUGH JOBS
"Am employed as Technician for a TV Clinic, handling the tough jobs that cannot be fixed in the home." BERNARD SIERS, Cleveland, Ohio.



HAS OWN BUSINESS
"I've come a long way in Radio and TV since graduating. Have my own business on Main Street." JOE TRAVERS, Asbury Park, New Jersey.

